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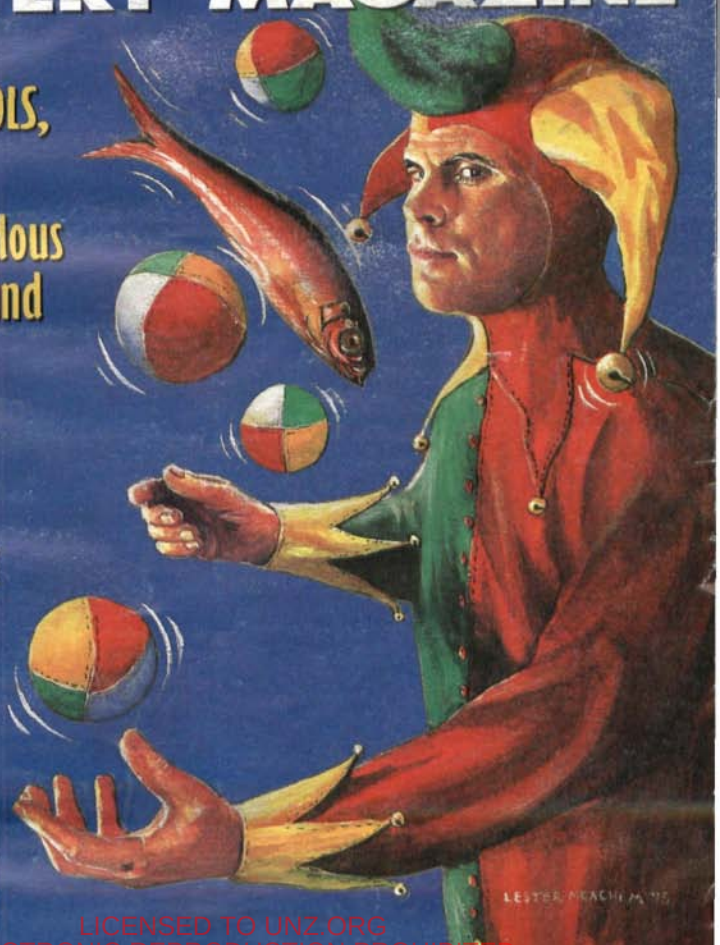

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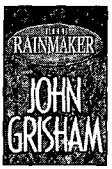

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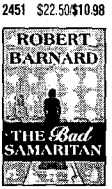

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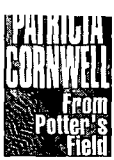

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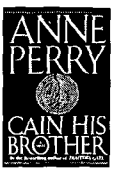

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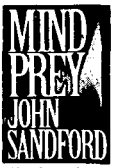

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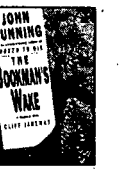

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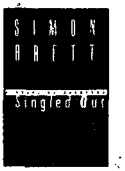

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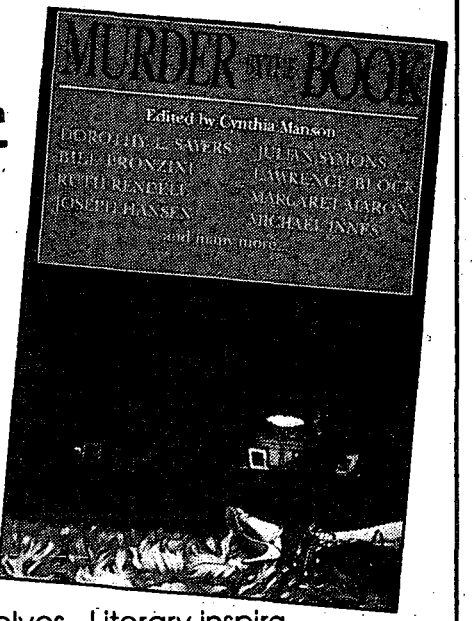
Death Between the Covers

Murder By the Book

Edited by Cynthia Manson



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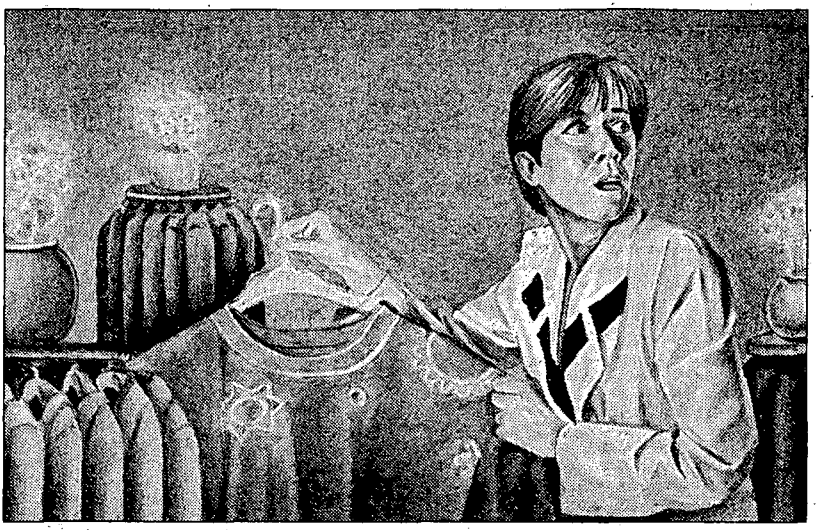

Art by Steve Cavallo

CLOTHES

by Ruth Rendell

"I'd like this, please."

She had put the dress down on the counter. The look the assistant gave her was slightly apprehensive. Alison had sounded breathless, she had sounded elated. Now that it was too late she restrained herself.

"How would you like to pay?"

Instead of answering, she laid the credit card on the counter where the dress was now being folded, amid layers of tissue paper. The bill came waving out of the machine and she signed in the too-small space on the right-hand side. At this point, and it was always the same, she couldn't wait to get away. Lingering, chatting to the assistant — "You'll get a lot of wear out of this one," "Enjoy wearing it" — embarrassed her. She felt as if she was there on false pretences or as if her secret self must inevitably be revealed. She walked off quickly and she was happy, she felt the

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familiar buzz, the swing of light-headedness, the rush of adrenalin. She had made her day, she had bought something.

Once outside, she took the dress out of the bag and put it into her briefcase along with the outline plans for the Grimwood project. That way the people in the office would not know what she had been doing. The carrier went into a litter bin and the bill with it. A taxi came and she got into it. Already the level of excitement had begun to flag. By the time she walked into the PR consultancy of which she was chief executive none of it was left. She smiled and told her assistant lunch had gone on longer than expected.

On the way home she bought something else. She didn't mean to. But that went without saying, for she scarcely ever did mean to. It was where she lived, she sometimes thought, the dangerous place she lived in, Knightsbridge, shopping country. If she and Gil moved out into the sticks, some distant suburb . . . She knew they wouldn't.

She should have had a taxi to her doorstep, not used the tube. Some of it was the fault of the dress, for now she knew she disliked the dress — the colour, the cut. She would never wear it, and the amount she had spent on it printed itself on her mind in black letters. The elation it had brought her had turned to panic. Absurdly, she had taken the tube to save money, because it cost ninety pence and a taxi would have been five pounds. But it gave her a half-mile walk down Sloane Street. At six, on late-closing night.

Sometimes Alison thought of the things she might have done at leisure in London. Gone to the National Gallery, the Wallace Col-

"We all have feelings of obsession and compulsion," said Ruth Rendell in an interview with the *New York Times*. "I know why I do things. I think some of the reasons are quite strange, but I would look at them and examine them, and ask myself why I did that." Some of the author's characters have a harder time understanding what fuels their compulsions: the protagonist of "Clothes," for instance, a competent professional who finds herself behaving in an obsessive and compromising way.

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lection, walked in the parks, joined the London Library. She had heard the Museum of the Moving Image was wonderful. Instead she went shopping. She bought things. Well, she bought clothes. Halfway down the long street of shops, her eye was caught by a sweater in a window. The feeling was familiar, the faint breathlessness, the drying mouth, the words repeated in her head—she must have it, she must have it. On these occasions she seemed to see the future so clearly. She seemed to live in advance the regret she would feel if she didn't have the thing, whatever it was. The remorse experienced when she *did* have it was forgotten.

The knob on the shop door was a heavy glass ball, set in brass. She closed her hand over the knob. She paused. But that was not unusual. Hesitating on the doorstep, she told herself she was buying this sweater because she had made a mistake with the dress. She didn't like the dress, but the sweater would make up for that. She turned the knob and the door came open. Inside, a woman sat at a gilded table with a marble top. She lifted her head, smiled at Alison, and said, "Hi." Alison knew the woman wouldn't get up and come over and start showing her things, it wasn't that kind of shop, and Alison knew about shops. She went to the rail where the sweater and its fellows hung. The fever was already upon her and reason gone. This feeling was like a combination of sexual excitement and the effect of a strong drink. When it had her in its clutch she stopped thinking, or rather, she thought only of the garment before her; how it would look on her, where she would wear it and when, how possessing it would change her life for the better.

Shopping had to be done in a rush. That was part of the whole character of it. Do it fast and do it impulsively. The blood beat in her head. She took the sweater off its hanger, held it up against herself.

The woman said, "Would you like to try it on?"

"I'll have it," Alison said. She took an identical sweater off the rail, but in a darker shade. "In fact, I'll have both." She responded to the assistant's smile with a radiant smile of her own.

When she had paid and was outside the shop once more, she looked at her watch and saw that the whole transaction had taken seven minutes. The two sweaters were too bulky to go in the briefcase, so she took out the dress and put it in the black shiny white-lettered bag with her new purchases. She began to think of how she was going to get into the flat without Gil seeing she had been shopping.

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He might not yet be home. Sometimes he came in first, sometimes she did. If he was home, she might be able to get into the bedroom and hide the bag before he saw. If the worst came to the worst and he saw the bag, he would suppose there was only one garment inside it, not three. The buzz was easing up, the adrenaline was being absorbed, and she understood something else: that this was the first time she had bought something without trying it on first.

The glass doors opened for her and she walked in. She went up in the lift. Her key slipped into the lock and turned and the front door opened. It was impossible to tell if he was there or not. She called out, "Gil?" and his voice answering from the kitchen, "I'm in here," made her jump. She ran into the bedroom and thrust the bag into the back of the clothes cupboard. It was his evening to cook. She had forgotten. When she was shopping she forgot everything else. She went into the kitchen and put her arms round him and kissed him. He was wearing an apron and holding a wooden spoon.

"Tell me," he said. "Do you actually like dried tomatoes?"

"Dried tomatoes? I've never thought about it. Well, no, I don't suppose I do, really."

"No one does. That's my great culinary discovery of the week. No one does but they pretend to, like they do about green peppers."

He enlarged on this. Gil produced a cookery programme for television and he began telling her about a soufflé that kept going wrong. At the fourth attempt, the star of the programme, a temperamental man, had picked up and upended the spoiled soufflé over the head of one of the camera crew. Alison listened and laughed in the right places and told him about the latest developments in the Grimwood account. He said he'd give her a shout when the food was ready and she went away into the bedroom to change.

Every evening, if they weren't going out, she changed into jeans or tracksuit pants and a sweatshirt. The irony was that these were old, she had had them for years, while the cupboard groaned under the weight of new clothes. There was barely room for the new dress and the sweaters to squeeze in. When would she wear any of them? Perhaps never. Perhaps, unworn, they would join the stack that must soon be packed into her largest suitcase and taken to the hospice shop.

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They loved her in the hospice shop. They called her Alison, they knew her so well. "What lovely clothes you always bring us, Alison," and, "You have quite a turnover in clothes, Alison — well, you must have in your job." They could probably run the hospice for a week on what they raised by the sale of her clothes.

It was an addiction, it was like alcoholism or drugs or gambling, and more expensive than drinking or the fruit machines. Last week, when she was coming in with a bright yellow bag and an olive-green bag, Gil had caught her in the hall. Caught her. She had used the words inadvertently, without thinking, and inaccurately. For Gil was the kindest and best of men, he would never, never reproach her. The worst thing was that he would *praise* her. He would tell her it was her money, she earned more than he did anyway, she could do what she liked with it. Why shouldn't she buy herself some new clothes?

She had imagined telling him then, when they came face-to-face and she had those bags in her hands. She imagined confessing, saying, I've something to tell you. His face would change, he would think what everyone thought when they heard those words from their partner. She would sit on the floor at his feet — all this she imagined, building an absurd scenario — and hold his hand and tell him, I do this, I am mad, it's driving me mad, and I can't stop. I keep buying clothes. Not jewellery or ornaments or furniture or pictures, not stuff to put on my face or my hair, not even shoes or hats or gloves. I buy clothes. A dress shop is a wine bar to me. It is my casino. I can't pass it. If I go into a department store to buy a box of tissues or a bathmat, I go upstairs, I buy clothes.

He would laugh. He would be happy and relieved because she was telling him she liked buying things to wear, not that she'd met someone else and was leaving him. Kisses then and reassurances and a heartening, Why shouldn't you spend your own money? He, who was so understanding, wouldn't understand this.

His voice called out, "Alison! It's ready."

They were to have a glass of wine first. This wine had been much praised on the programme and he wanted her to try it. He raised his glass to her. "Do you know what today is?"

Some anniversary. It was women who were supposed to remember these things, not men: "Should I? Oh, dear."

"Not the first time we met," he said. "Not even the first time you took me out to dinner. The first time *I* took *you* out. Three years ago today."

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She put into the words all the emotion with which her thoughts had charged her. "I love you."

Gil scarcely knew what clothes she possessed. He never looked in her cupboard. Sometimes, when she wore one of the new dresses or suits or shirts, he would say, "I like that. It's new, isn't it?"

"I've had it for ages. You must have seen it before."

And he accepted that. He didn't notice clothes much, he wasn't interested. But when he asked, she should have told him. Or when the credit-card statements came in. Instead of paying the huge sums secretly, she should have said, "Look at this. This is what I do with my money. This is my madness and you must stop me."

She couldn't. She was too ashamed. She even wondered what the credit-card people must think of her when month after month they assessed her expenditure and found another thousand pounds gone on clothes. The shop assistants wrote "clothes" in the space on the chit and she had once thought, stupidly, of asking them to put "goods" instead. It was because of what she was that the humiliation was so intense, because she was clever and accomplished, with a good degree and a dazzling CV, at the top of her profession, sought-after, able to ask fees that raised eyebrows but seldom deterred. And her addiction was the kind that afflicted the football pools winners or sixteen-year-old school-leavers.

They were better than she. At least they were honest and open about it. Some could be frank and admit it, even make a joke of it. A few months back she had travelled to Edinburgh with a client to make a product presentation. They had stayed overnight. Edinburgh is not a place that immediately comes to mind as a shopping centre, while there are many other interesting things to do there, but the client announced as soon as they got into the station taxi that she would like to spend the two hours they had to spare at the shops.

"I'm a compulsive shopper, you know. It's what gives me a buzz."

Alison had said restrainedly, "What did you want to buy?"

"Buy? Oh, I don't know. I know it when I see it."

So Alison had gone shopping with her and seen all the signs and symptoms that she saw in herself, but with one exception. This woman was not ashamed, she was not deceitful.

"I'm crazy, really," she said when she had bought a suit she con-

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fessed she "didn't like all that much." "I've got wardrobes full of stuff I never wear." And she laughed merrily. "I suppose you plan everything you buy terribly carefully, don't you?"

And Alison, who had stood by while the suit was bought, sick with desire to buy herself, controlling herself with all her might, wearing what she now feared had been a supercilious half-smile, agreed that this was so. She smiled like a superior being, one who bought clothes when the old ones wore out.

On that trip she had managed to avoid buying anything. The energy expended in denial had left her exhausted. In London, afterwards, she went on a dreadful splurge, like the bulimic's binge. It was that day, or the day after, she had read the piece in the paper about compulsive behaviour. Eating disorders, for instance, indicated some deep-seated emotional disturbance. It was the same with gambling, even with shopping. The compulsive shopper buys as a way of masking a need for love and to cover up inadequacy.

It wasn't true. She loved Gil. She had everything she wanted. Her life was good and satisfying. The compulsion to buy had only begun when she realised she was rich, she had more than enough, she could afford it now. Only she couldn't, hardly anyone could. Hardly anyone's income could stand this drain on it.

Compulsive shopping was a cry for help. That was what the psychologists said. But help for what? For help to stop compulsive shopping?

Passing the shop where she had bought the sweaters — in a taxi, for safety's sake — she reflected on something she had thought of only momentarily at the time. She had bought the sweaters without trying them on. It was as if she was saying, I don't care if they fit or not, that is not why I am buying them, I want to *buy*, not to have.

The office was in the city, in a part where there were few shops. This, of course, was a blessing, yet she had recognised lately her dissatisfaction with the absence of clothes shops, the peculiar kind of *hunger* this lack brought her. Once she was outside in the street, an almost overwhelming impulse came to get in a taxi and be taken to where the shops were. She managed to resist. She had work to do, she had to be at her desk, near those phones, beside that fax machine. But as the days passed, the shopless days, she began to think, It will be all right for me to go shopping next time

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I have the opportunity, it won't be sick, it won't be neurotic, because it has been so long, it has been a whole week. . . .

There was an evening when it rained and she couldn't find a taxi. Again she took the tube and at Knightsbridge looked for a taxi to take her that half mile. It was quite possible to walk home by residential streets, there were many options, and it was one of the most charming parts of London. Even in the rain. But compulsive shopping began before she came to the shops, she had learnt that now, it was what led her steps to Sloane Street when she might so easily have taken Seville Street and Lowndes Square.

Her thoughts were strange. She recognised them as strange. Mad, perhaps. She was thinking that if she controlled herself this evening, she would not have to do so on the following day. Next day, after the client conference, she would find herself in Piccadilly, at the bottom of Bond Street, and if she walked up towards the tube station, her route would take her along Brook Street and into South Molton Street, into one of the meccas of shopping, into heaven, buying country, shopland.

She passed the shop with the globular glass doorknob and as she came to the next, already able to see ahead of her the gleam of a single shimmering garment isolated in its window, footsteps came running behind her and Gil's arm was around her, his umbrella held high over her head.

"You ought to buy that," he said. "You'd look good in that."

She shuddered. He felt the shudder and looked at her in concern.

"A designer walked over my grave," she said.

It was the time to say she wouldn't buy the dress and tell him why not. She couldn't do it. All she felt was resentment that he had caught up with her and, by his presence and his kind, innocent suggestion, stopped her buying it. He was like the well-intentioned friend who offers the secret drinker a double scotch.

In the morning she went in late, walking up Sloane Street. There was nothing to do before the conference. She went into the shop and bought the dress Gil had said would look good on her. She didn't try it on, but told the surprised assistant it was her size, she knew it would fit. High on adrenaline, she told herself this purchase need not stop her buying later in the day. The day was gone anyway, she thought, it was spoiled by buying the dress and there was no point in taking a stand today, a preliminary shot of the drug had gone in. If control was possible, it could start

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tomorrow. In the office she took the dress out of her briefcase and stuffed it in a desk drawer.

The conference was over by three. For the past hour or more she had scarcely been attending. Once her own talk was over she lost interest and let her thoughts run in the direction they always did these days. Even during the talk she once or twice lost the thread of what she was saying, needed to refer to her notes, seemed to fumble with words. The company chairman asked her if she was feeling unwell. Sitting down again, taking a drink of water, she looked ahead of her to the great thoroughfare of shops waiting for her, full of things waiting to be bought, sitting there and waiting, and a huge longing took hold of her. She almost ran out of the building, she was breathless and she was thirsty, as if she had never taken a drink of water.

On her way up Bond Street she bought a suit and a jacket. She tried both on, but it was only for form's sake and because she cringed under the shop assistant's surprised look.

A taxi came as if to rescue her while she walked onwards and upwards, carrying her bags, but she let it pass by and turned into Brook Street. By this time, at this *stage* of her indulgence, her feet seemed to lose contact with the ground. She floated or skimmed the surface of the pavement. In the road she was always in danger of being run over. If she had met someone she knew, she would have passed him by unseeing. Her body had undergone chemical changes which had a profound effect on recognition, on logical thought, on rational behaviour. They negated reason. She was unable to control the urge to buy because for these moments, this hour perhaps, she rejected a "cure," she wanted her compulsion, she loved it, she was drunk on it.

Thoughts she had, words in her head, but they were always simple and direct. Why shouldn't I have these things? I can afford them. Why shouldn't I be well-dressed? I mustn't be guilty about this simple enjoyable *happy* pastime. . . . They repeated themselves in her mind as she floated along, aware too of her steadily beating heart.

In South Molton Street she bought a shirt, and in the shop next door a skirt with a sweater that matched it. She tried neither on, and when she was outside something made her look at the label on the skirt and sweater, which showed her she had bought them two sizes too big. She stood there, in the walking street, feeling elation drop, knowing she couldn't go back in there.

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She was ashamed. The fall was very swift from reckless excitement to a kind of visionary horror, it slid off her like oversize clothes slipping from her shoulders to the floor, and there came a sudden flash of appalled insight. She began to walk mechanically. Nearly at Oxford Street, she put the new clothes bags into the first rubbish bin she came to. Then she put the suit and the jacket in too. She turned her back and ran.

In the taxi she was crying. The taxi driver said, "Are you okay, love?" She said she wasn't well, she would be all right in a minute. The waste, the wickedness of such waste, were what she thought of. There were thousands, millions, who never had new clothes, who wore hand-downs or rags or just managed to buy secondhand. She had thrown away new clothes.

For some reason she thought of Gil, who trusted and loved her. She couldn't face him again, she would have to go to some hotel for the night. By a tortuous route the taxi was winding through streets behind Broadcasting House, behind Langham Place. It came down into Regent Street and she told the driver to let her off. He didn't like that, and she gave him a five-pound note. What was five pounds? She had just thrown away two hundred times that.

Carrying only her briefcase, she went into a department store. She caught sight of herself in a mirror, her wild hair, her staring eyes, the whiteness of her face: a madwoman. Something else struck her, as she paused there briefly. She wasn't well-dressed, almost any woman she passed was better dressed than she was. Every week, nearly every day, she bought clothes, mountains of clothes, cupboards-full, clothes to be unloaded on charities or thrown away unworn, but she was dressed less well than a woman who bought what she wore out of the money a husband gave her for housekeeping.

She hated clothes. Understanding came in migraine-like flashes of light and darkness. Why had she never realised how she hated clothes? They made her feel sick, the new, slightly bitter smell of them, their sinuous slithering pressures on her, surrounding her as they now did, rails of coats and jackets, suits and dresses. She was in designer country and she could smell and feel, but she saw very little. Her eyes were affected by her mental state, and a mist hung in front of them.

Fumbling, she began to slide clothes off the rail, a shirt here, a sweater there. She opened her briefcase and stuffed the things

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inside. A label hung out and part of a sleeve when she closed the case. She snatched a knitted garment, long and sleeveless and buttoned, and a blouse of stiff organza, another sweater, another shirt. No one saw her, or if they did, made no attempt to intervene.

She pulled a scarf from a shelf and wound it round her neck. Pulling at the ends, she thought how good it would be to lose consciousness, for the scarf quietly to strangle her. With her overflowing briefcase, too full to close, she began to walk down the stairs. No one came after her. No one had seen. On her way through leather goods she picked up a handbag, though it was unusual for her to be attracted by such things, then a wallet and a pair of gloves. She held them in one hand, while the other held the briefcase, the bigger garments over her arm.

Between the inner glass doors and the entrance doors a bell began ringing urgently. The security officer approached. She sat down on the floor with all the stolen things around her and when he came up to her, she said quite sanely, though with a break in her voice, "Help me, someone help me." ●

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LEGACY

by Suzanne Jones

The town of Gilead, Texas, appears in Suzanne Jones's stories over and over again, though the characters who inhabit it change. Since Ms. Jones is herself from small-town Texas, it's easy to see why she would choose this setting. She shares with a very few other psychological suspense writers an ability to tell a convincing story from entirely within the consciousness of one character, sometimes without a scrap of dialogue. ¶

My son Jason, who is seven, stands amid the ruins of the rose garden, its petals torn, its stems crushed and broken at his feet. His brother Caleb has been led away to punishment, and his thin wails layer the air. His father is an old-fashioned man who believes in the power of the rod to forestall future transgressions.

Jason does not see me, but I can observe his face from where I stand behind his great-grandmother's lace curtains. He is smiling a smile which causes me to become very, very still. So still I can hear the beating of my heart. It is a sly smile, a smile which arises from the satisfaction in secret knowledge. I have seen that smile before, and it fills me with dread.

The past has a fearsome pull to it. I feel its tug now as I watch my smiling son, and resist the dark helplessness it engenders as we listen to his brother's suffering.

Memory is no respecter of order, the sequence we impress on the chaos of our lives which we call time. I remember no particular pattern to the events of the summer I found the thing in the kitchen. In a sense, all memory is false anyway; the recall of something in the mind is not the same as the thing itself. The thing. To this day I can think of it in no other way. It lost its humanness as

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its life ran out bright red and slippery across the linoleum floor.

It was the summer Mother married Sonny and had him drive her home in his cherry-red Ford Mustang to live with us. It was the summer Cap left. The summer Grandmother and I had forged an uneasy alliance at a cost I could only guess at, at the time. For she had put aside her need and her resolve to save me, to bring me into her religion, to make me tremble on my knees before her demanding God. I did not delude myself that it was a permanent truce. She would revoke it whenever it ceased to be useful to her.

She was a large, heavy woman of abundant energy who wore her steel-gray hair in braids which wrapped around her skull like a helmet. For such a warlike visage, her features had a surprising delicacy: small, rosebud mouth, thin nose, and watchful, deep-set eyes that had faded to the color of the sky. She must have been desperate to have taken me on as an ally. That is how I see it now. Then, I only felt the welcome cessation of pressure, of a will hideously strong relaxing its coils a bit to let me breathe. I had Sonny to thank for that.

How my mother met Sonny I'll never really know. She said one of the women in her office made the arrangement. It might have been true. Mother wasn't the sort to go to roadhouses by herself or even in the company of other women. She had too much pride in our name if not in herself to do that. Besides, the men she would have found there would have been unsuitable. She could never have brought them home.

The roadhouses existed because Gilead was dry and likely to remain so as long as Baptists and Democrats were in power, and they had been in power for as long as anyone could remember in our part of Texas. The roadhouses had been built on the road to the lake, just across the county line. Though the people in the next county were just as righteous as their brethren in Gilead, they had the lake, good fishing, and tourism to contend with, and economic opportunity had gotten the better of their Baptist consciences.

So the folks of Gilead who wanted to sin and/or just plain enjoy themselves for an evening of drink and dancing had to take themselves across the county line to the roadhouses. Which is what Mother did with Sonny. And once there, Wichita Falls must not have seemed so far away. A real city which offered real amusements.

Sonny said he was from California and was tall and blond and

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as fair as Mother was small, sleek, and dark-haired. He was a salesman at the time, though I cannot now remember what it was that he sold, for he lost that job almost immediately. Anyway, they made a striking couple and married over that weekend spent in Wichita Falls. Neither my grandmother—who was my mother's mother—nor I was asked to be present. Some stranger had to be pressed into witnessing the hasty ceremony. His doing so was an occurrence my grandmother deeply resented, though she said nothing to which anyone could respond. She merely added this resentment to the litany of woes which she would recite under her breath over the carcass of the chicken she cut up for Sunday dinner. The meat cleaver would rise and fall, severing bone and sinew with a terrible efficiency to the accompaniment of these scarcely audible ills of one sort or another.

Perhaps she thought—had she been asked to attend the wedding—that she might have pointed out the impulsiveness, the rashness of the act, and have put it off until cooler weather. Maybe even have prevented it. But it was a done deal by the time Mother and Sonny drove up to the house. Mother showed us the license.

Of course it is possible, if not very likely, that Grandmother resented being excluded from the ceremony because it deprived her of the opportunity to be magnanimous. Gracious even. For Mother and Grandmother had entered into a struggle of varying degrees of subtlety for dominance. It seemed a contest that Grandmother must win because of her greater experience and her formidable staying power. But Mother had secured a definite leg up by living apart from her parents for so many years, conducting her life as she saw fit, rearing her child, and, most importantly, obtaining the financial means by which to live. She had gone to business school on the little money my father and the government had provided her and was not now dependent on any man for her livelihood. That knowledge had given her an independence which she fiercely protected. It earned her my grandmother's envy and respect and enabled mother and daughter to live together in cautious harmony. But the more time elapsed from my grandfather's death, the more assertive my grandmother became, as if something grown cold in the disappointment of time had begun to warm itself and was stirring to life.

Grandmother cleaned the house as she had for her husband. She grew the vegetables and tended the chickens and milked the

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cow. She sewed and cooked and read her Bible and rocked and went to church. And we were a family much like any other. But the men were dead, and we were a family of women only. Free from arbitrary aggression, from casual brutality and mundane cruelty. I am confident now that my grandmother did not recognize the essential sterility of our household. I think she only felt the freedom from pain and endless accommodation, and did not realize the extent of my mother's dissatisfaction. For my mother was still a young woman.

For my grandmother, Sonny must have burst on us like a hand grenade in a henhouse.

I did not initially share my grandmother's inherent mistrust of Mother's new husband. Nor her instinctive recoil to a defensive posture. I saw only Sonny's elegant beauty and was as susceptible to that studied charm as my mother. Besides, I had a hunger for him, for a man to go with me to the infrequent events held in our town for fathers and daughters. Someone who would stand behind me, and empower me with his mysterious masculinity.

My father had been killed in Viet Nam. He had been a careless kind of soldier, just marking his time until he could be sent home. Later I would discover that he had been given the choice of the military or prison for some violent, thoughtless act that no one now professes to remember.

I remember him in dreams only, since we never met. From a snapshot in my mother's album, he appears to have been a thin young man with bold, handsome eyes, who wore the ill-fitting uniform of an army private. My mother was pregnant with me when he was killed. However, we did not go home at once to the ranch outside Gilead, since my grandfather's enmity toward his daughter continued despite my father's sacrifice. A number of years were to pass for me in a series of rooms in nearby towns, in the charge of elderly cousins while Mother worked. Mother and I did not go home to the ranch until my grandfather, after years of threatening to die, finally did.

"So is the old reprobate dead at last?" I had asked my mother on her return to our rooms in Wichita Falls. I was nine and very fond of words like "reprobate," if not very confident as to their exact meaning.

My mother turned furiously on me. "You are never to talk that way about my father again!"

I found it odd that dying had so raised him in her esteem. It was

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the only time in our relationship that I suspected her of hypocrisy. But she may have taken my remark as a personal affront. He had been her father, and as such, was worthy of my respect if not her own. However, his death was not without its value. It restored unity to our family, since shortly after the funeral we moved into the house outside Gilead.

Perhaps had we always lived there, my grandmother and I would not have been antagonists. We would have had a common history, perhaps even a reservoir of affection to draw upon. But I was my father's child, and my grandmother viewed my lack of interest in her religion as but one example of his bad blood. And it was true that I wasn't much interested. Oh, I wanted to go to Sunday School because there were other children there, but the church and prayer meetings of which she was so fond never held any appeal for me. Nor, it must be admitted, for my mother.

Mother must have had other men in her life besides Sonny, but I have little memory of them. Cap was the only one I remember because he stayed around the longest. Despite my grandmother's obvious dislike and disapproval. Cap was long and kind of stringy and clever with his hands. He repaired fences and gates and fixed the front step.

He took me dove hunting. I remember lying prone against the dirt dam of the tank, my heart beating as loudly as the flutter of their wings as they wheeled and came to the water. I loved the oily smell of the shotgun, the splendid boom of it, and the greasy smell of cordite on the dimming air. And the thrill as the birds struck the slope like bloody stones and rolled down the muddy bank.

But Cap's maleness excited suspicion in my grandmother. She sniffed at him and whined and wheedled at my mother over the breakfast table and over dinner, where all the serious conversations took place in our family. He was just a man handy with a hammer. Poor white trash.

In the end, Grandmother's opposition had proved too much. I sometimes thought I saw him as hot spring evenings melted into long summer nights, standing at the edge of the woods behind the house, his body tense with sadness and desire. But it was probably a trick of light and shadow. A tree trunk. A post. Or my unwillingness to let go of things forever lost. Doubtless it was less my grandmother's interference than that the responsibility of my mother, her mother, and a child proved a burden too heavy for

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him to bear. And we were the real reason Cap took himself down some limitless highway.

The roots of things always go deeper than one chooses to remember. To understand and forgive the reasons for our enchantment — that is, my mother's and my breathless fascination with Sonny — you have to understand what it was like to live in the big old house on the ranch. Except it wasn't really a ranch anymore. The house had been built by my grandfather, who had made a lot of money and lost a lot of money and spent the last twenty years of his life in mourning for it, mostly flat on his back or drunk as a skunk. He was a bandy-legged little Irishman with almost no sense of humor and a streak of violence in him as pronounced and random as lightning against a summer night.

By the time his heart gave out on him, the ranch had shrunk to a few acres around the house. My grandmother raised some chickens for their eggs, and grew some beets and turnip greens for personal consumption. And kept a milk cow who was no respecter of property lines and who was constantly straying over fences in need of repair to graze on the Clausens' corn.

From the highway, almost a quarter of a mile down a straight dirt lane, our house looked as grand and impressive as on the day it was built, but as one drew closer it was easy to see that two women could not keep it up with little money and less skill. The only one on the place who could fix anything had been Cap, and as I said, he had lit out for places unknown a short time before Mother brought Sonny home.

Mother had been the only woman in our family ever to have worked, that is, to have brought home money like a man. She had various jobs of a clerical nature with various companies. The money wasn't much, but we were getting by on it, along with the egg money. At least as far as I knew. I was ten years old when Mother brought Sonny home, and for almost a whole summer, I was half in love with him myself. Even though nothing he did turned out particularly well, and some of the things he did were so disastrous even Mother was hard-pressed to find excuses for them.

My grandmother put it quite well when she said that she thought Sonny erred only to experience the joy of forgiveness. Of course she muttered this to the chicken she was dismembering.

But sometimes it did seem so. From running over the best layer in the flock to setting fire to one of the sheds, Sonny seemed

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stalked by misfortune but ever ready to admit his shortcomings.

It was only after a month or two that we realized there would be no successes to balance them out. No triumphs, however small, to which we could look forward. Moreover, over the summer we would come to the gradual realization that he carried with him no real regret for the damage and loss and suffering he inflicted — despite his protestations to the contrary. No, that's not quite right. He simply had no conscience. His failures had been so numerous that over time they had worn the prick of conscience smooth. They did not trouble him. But the worst thing about Sonny was that he had a child's sense of retribution. I was the first to recognize that. Then Grandmother knew, for although she did not confide in me, nor I her, her questions began to have edges to them. We knew about Sonny. For a long time, Mother did not.

The cat — my cat — clawed Sonny in rough play and disappeared. The Clausens' mule kicked the stuffings out of him and sickened and died. If Sonny suffered, something or someone else always seemed to suffer in return.

It wasn't knowledge which came on us all of a sudden, like my Great-Aunt Mabel's conversion to Christ or an attack of the flu, but there was a growing awareness that there was something small and mean and dangerous at the heart of the man, something frightening that could not be touched.

Not that anyone really tried. Mother's way of dealing with any problem was by pretending it wasn't there. I said nothing because I was sure that no one would listen to me since no one ever did anyway. But I noticed that Grandmother had become very careful around Sonny, though she began to chip away little by little at Mother's regard for him. Unlike Cap, toward whom Grandmother did not bother to conceal her contempt, Grandmother was never critical of Sonny when Sonny was around, but when he wasn't, she would begin to tell Mother most of the things Mother didn't want to hear. Grandmother had the instinct if not the intelligence to know she was dangerously overmatched in Sonny. Only Mother could get rid of Sonny. But Mother was still in love with him.

Grandmother disapproved of sexual love so strongly that it must have puzzled Mother how she had seven children (only Mother had survived into majority). However, that was duty. It was purely sinful to enjoy the conjugal bed. And it was pretty obvious that Mother did enjoy it. And continued to enjoy it, despite all. Sonny's smile excused a world of ills.

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You'd have thought that when Sonny got a job selling oil-field supplies, which took him back on the road, things might have been better between us. But of course that gave Grandmother more time to chip away. The little time he now spent at home seemed to intensify everything that wasn't quite right about him and us.

When he came home from the road in his red Ford Mustang, he pretended to be glad to see Grandmother and me and brought her talcum bath powder and me toys that were too young for me, but it was no use. Our opinion of him could not be bought. It was unalterable. As much as my grandmother and I mistrusted each other, we were now united in our opposition to Mother's husband. And Mother began to waver in the face of our alliance. Sonny's absences weren't making her heart grow any fonder, as Grandmother chipped away and I condemned him by my silence. Cumulatively we began to have the effect that perhaps each of his failures should have had. Charm, after all, is in the eye of the beholder, and we saw to it that Sonny squandered all of it. Through every fault of his own that Grandmother could point out.

He was the last to realize what was happening, but Grandmother and I didn't even have to look at each other the day Mother turned her cheek coldly for Sonny's kiss as she welcomed him home. From that moment on, his eyes took on an uneasy look. He had begun to lose confidence in his ability always to get his own way. He was aware that the real power in our family had shifted to Mother, and unaccountably, he had lost her favor, or so it must have seemed to him. He suspected her of faithlessness while he was on the road, and of course he was correct. That she had no lover didn't mean she was loyal. On the contrary, she had finally slipped into our camp. However, one of the consequences of that was that she seemed to loathe herself almost as much as him. Now she was disgusted with her choices and ashamed of her appetite. The Baptist gene was kicking in. She brooded and avoided him. When she wasn't at work, she'd disappear for hours in the woods behind the house.

All of which was maddening to Sonny. I don't know that he loved my mother, because I was not generous enough to grant him that capacity, but he was keenly aware of her loss. And if Sonny had been frightening before, now he was a nightmare walking.

He tried to get the name of Mother's lover first out of her, then out of me. He wheedled, he cajoled. When that didn't work, he lit

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into me. Grandmother beat on him with a broom, and he was so astonished that he stopped hitting me.

Later he would say that he had made a mistake. He would tell Mother that he never meant to hurt anyone. He was sorry, he said, and he smiled. But the confidence that had always backed up that smile had forever vanished.

He made an effort to mollify us by taking Mother with him to see the Baptist minister. For counseling to help him get along better with Mother and the rest of the family. They only went the one time, and Mother never told us what was said. It became important only later, at the trial.

The day it happened I had come home from school on the bus like I always had. The heat beat down on my head like a general punishment for unspecified sins. But then, it always did at that time of year, which was late September. No sense of foreboding gripped me as I trudged the long quarter mile to the house. The light flashed and rippled across the Clausens' corn fields like watery silk. As it always did that time of year. I was not uneasy. Not when I came up the steps and opened the screen door. Nor when I called for my grandmother and the stillness of the house sopped up the sound like water in the dust. But as I went along the gloomy old hall, I became aware that something was terribly wrong. Maybe it was the smell of the blood. Blood does smell when there is enough of it. Or maybe the air still trembled with the violence of the blows. Or maybe what waited for me in the kitchen has forever altered the memory of my coming on it.

I went out back to the live oak and was sick.

Ed Clausen had come over to complain about the cow again and met Sonny coming out of the house in a clean shirt but still picking at the blood on his hands. Then the sheriff came, and somebody went into town and got Mother from work.

By evening they had picked up Sonny and safely locked him away. Grandmother was dead, somebody had hacked her to pieces with the meat cleaver, and it must have been Sonny. Everyone knew how they hated each other. The Baptist minister knew it. My mother knew it. I knew it. And Clausen had seen him coming out of the house, and they had found the bloody shirt where Sonny had left it on the floor of the bedroom he shared with my mother.

Some weeks later there was a trial, but it didn't go on for long. Justice was more swiftly served in those days. They found Sonny guilty and sentenced him to die in the electric chair. In those days

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the guilty weren't nearly as deserving of humane execution as they are now. And Sonny was surely guilty. Guilty of the torture and death of creatures less powerful than himself. Guilty of conscienceless cruelty all of his life. Guilty.

But not of that particular crime. I had seen him park his red Ford Mustang and come up the steps to the house in a clean white shirt with clean hands when I had come around the corner of the house. In his unerring instinct for doing the wrong thing, he must have picked up the meat cleaver and touched the body, less from concern, no doubt, than curiosity. Then changed his shirt and ran.

It was the morning of Sonny's execution that I had seen that particular smile in the mirror over the mantle in the living room. There Mother and I waited for the clock in the hall to chime out the end of Sonny's final hour. She smiled then just the way my son is smiling now. ●

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Carla Graubard
Publisher

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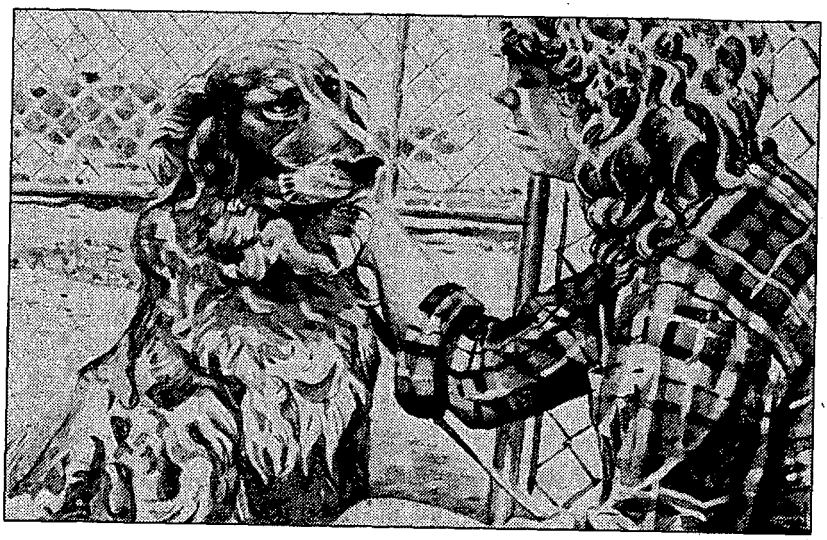

Art by Ron Bucalo

THE DOG THAT BIT YOU

by Mary Kittredge

Watching the champion dogs gait through their paces at Westminster, one is given no sense of the work it took getting them there. But dogs at the highest levels are a labor-intensive bunch, their basic maintenance being the least of one's troubles. After that come training, grooming, and showing, the exhaustion and expense of travel, and the strain of competition, as well as a degree of presence in the notoriously contentious community of professional dog enthusiasts, not every member of which is always pleasant, nor at all times even entirely sane.

The dogs themselves, by contrast, are undemanding and kind. It is in their nature to forgive. I sometimes think that's why I have devoted my life to them: In their eyes one so rarely encounters reproach. One can almost believe in the possibility of absolution. Under their unaccusing gaze, I live in the illusion, at least, of a state of grace; I can forget the guilt that gnaws me as if I were a bone.

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It began on the day of the accident: I had finished early-morning kennel chores and was headed in the van to pick up a bag of wood shavings for the puppies' weaning pen, and after that to get some pellets of dog chow and cans of mixing meat, when the truck swerved out of the opposite lane straight at me. I had enough time to know that I was in trouble, but little more.

The impact, when it came, was a decisive thump that flung me forward into the seat-belt harness, punched my fist through the windshield, and sent metal dog crates crashing all over the cargo compartment. The steering column came up out of the floor to smack me once, hard, in the center of my chest, creating a small, bright explosion of pain.

A former respiratory therapist for a major city hospital, Mary Kittredge knows the ins and outs of the medical world, a background she employs to great effect in a series of mystery novels published by St. Martin's Press. A seventh book featuring her nurse detective Edwina Crusoe, *Kill or Cure,* was published last May. Ms. Kittredge also knows her way about in the world of professional dog breeding. She is the proud owner of a black Labrador retriever whose obedience training helped spark the following story.

Next came a period of tranquillity during which I sat peering through the starred windshield of the other vehicle. I was able to make out that its driver was a man, and that he had red hair; soon, though, I became distracted by the acrid smoke billowing from the van's engine area. The driver's-side door wouldn't open, and the far door was blocked by the demolished passenger seat; happily, there were no dogs riding in the van, but that still left me to be incinerated.

Unbuckling my seat belt, I began trying to escape. But the moment I moved, a giant reached down and chopped me viciously in the leg with an axe of pain, and when I looked to see why, I discovered that my ankle was dangling by a forlorn little strip of flesh no thicker than my index finger. Also, I was having trouble breathing.

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A fellow in a yellow slicker approached the van's passenger side, carrying a sledgehammer. A shower of glittering glass was followed by a gratifying amount of cool, fresh air, and then by the fellow in the slicker.

He hauled the passenger seat out and came back for me. I remember trying to help him. I remember the look on his smooth young face as he realized: my foot was stuck beneath the brake pedal, trapping me. I remember his eyes, so full of sorrowing decision.

From somewhere in the engine compartment came an ominous crackling sound, as of oil being heated in a skillet. The fellow seized me and I remember screaming as he tore the remaining flesh from the ankle to free me.

But for the life of me, I don't remember the explosion.

Jerking awake, I swallowed the shriek that always came at the end of the terrible dream. Sweating and shaking, I sat in the darkness, listening to the rain drum the corrugated roofs of the dog runs just outside the window.

A cold, wet nose nudged my hand. At home, I would have invited the animal up onto the bed at once, but here the rules were different. "Shala," I whispered, "you belong out in the kitchen."

Her tail thumped entreatingly. I reminded myself that dog hairs, once having invaded the bed's woolen blanket, would be impossible to pick out. The comforter draped over the footboard, however, posed no such difficulty, and when I had arranged it on the floor she stepped onto it delicately, sighing as she settled. I shoved a pillow in beside her, pulled the rest of the comforter over both of us, and closed my eyes.

This, as any trainer will tell you, is no way to treat an animal. A dog must see you as its leader, not its littermate, in order to obey. On the other hand, Shala was already doing what I wanted her to: breathing easily, smelling of warm, clean dog, her heart beating under my hand. When I woke again it was five A.M., she was gone, and the alarm clock was buzzing steadily at me.

"*Good* morning," Holly Freeman chirped brightly as I trudged into her kitchen and poured myself some strong black coffee.

Holly sat in her wheelchair, drinking a glass of grapefruit juice and frowning at the day's boarder-dog schedule, her leg, in its cast, sticking out of her flannel nightshirt like a big, white log.

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Two weeks earlier, Holly had been on an outing at the seashore, balancing on some rocks, when a big wave knocked her into a tide pool; en route, her leg met violently with the rocks. Since then her friends had been helping her run a busy boarding kennel, care for her own twelve purebred Labrador retrievers, and raise ten black pups whose bloodlines would put the Windsors to shame.

Allowing myself another hasty gulp of coffee, I lined a dozen dog dishes on the counter and began measuring kibble into them, adding brewer's yeast, vitamins, and other supplements as directed by the list Holly had posted on the refrigerator. Some dogs got cottage cheese, too, and others got mixing meat; luckily the dishes had the dogs' names printed on them so I could keep it fairly straight. As I worked, dogs began gathering around me, jostling me and one another in their anxiety to eat, *eat,* EAT.

Finishing in an instant, they charged in a pack for the back door, which led to a roofed, enclosed concrete run. Following, I waded in among them to the chain-link gate. Beyond, a quarter of an acre of similarly fenced flat-packed earth was muddy with the recent downpours; I let the dogs out into it.

In one corner of the yard gaped an enormous hole where Holly's friend Peter Wilson, another local dog breeder, had nearly finished installing a new dry well; it wasn't strictly legal, but Holly only meant to run washing-machine water into it. Raising and boarding dogs generates a lot of laundry, and she didn't want to overload the septic system on her quasi-suburban property. Remembering that the kennel helper, Kelley Greene, would also be here all day, I made a mental note to try to keep her and Peter out of one another's way; the two had recently broken off a romance—or rather, Peter had broken it off—and the last thing I needed was any sort of dust-up between the two of them.

"Four arrivals and two departures today," Holly announced as I came back into the kitchen. "At least the boarding business hasn't gone to hell along with the rest of my so-called life, but it's going to be another busy morning."

Despite her bum leg, in the few minutes I'd been gone she had managed to get out boxes of cereal, milk, and bread for toast, and was now balancing dangerously but determinedly on her wooden crutches as she tried to remove the eggs from the refrigerator. I scooped up the egg carton, slid it onto the counter beside the stove, and began grabbing dog dishes off the floor before she could accidentally put a crutch tip into one of them.

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"You know," I told her, stuffing an empty milk carton into one of the empty kibble bags Holly used for trash receptacles, "it would be more efficient if I just took a hammer and broke the other leg for you, since that's obviously what you're trying to accomplish."

"Oh, all right." She sank back into the chair. "I just hate not being able to do anything, is all."

"I know. It won't last forever." I pulled the trash-filled kibble bag from the garbage can and put another empty bag into the can. There were only two more empty bags available, a sign that Holly needed to order more dog food; somehow, she had balanced her domestic ecology so that her household trash output just about equaled her dogs' kibble input.

Making a note of this on Holly's "To Do" list, I began washing dog dishes assembly-line style, then started preparing the pups' breakfast of ground kibble and warm water, mixed to the consistency of thin gruel. "After all, look at me," I said. "A year ago I wasn't expected to live, and all I got was a stiff leg out of it."

Holly sighed, brushing back her thick red hair. She was fifty, but you'd never have known it to look at her. Some women wait for beauty until they get older, and she was one of them.

"Does it still hurt?" She eyed my ankle, thickly encased in a woolen sock.

Miraculously, the blast had thrown the severed foot clear; it and I had been rushed to the hospital in separate ambulances, and later the foot and I were reunited.

"Sometimes it aches a little," I admitted. The bones never healed right, and eventually I'd had the whole thing fused with enough steel to reinforce a bridge abutment. It didn't move at all, and it throbbed wickedly in rainy weather or when I tried to walk too far, but I was not about to tell Holly that. She felt bad enough already having to ask people to do things for her.

"Anyway," she said, "I really appreciate your help, Rita. I don't know what I would do without you."

I picked up the gruel bowl and a dish containing breakfast for the mother dog. Her meal included a chunk of raw beef, a mound of cottage cheese, canned chicken, and so many vitamins and minerals that we'd dubbed the mixture "atomic dog food."

"You'd just have to ask one of your dozens of other devoted friends to come around," I told Holly. "Do me a favor and sit while I'm gone, please. I'm at your service, but I'm an animal specialist, not an orthopedic surgeon, all right?"

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She agreed, and I didn't believe her, but I had no choice; the puppies were hungry. I carried the food out to the puppy palace, a very nice little pre-fab metal building with its own gas heater, running water, and storage for kennel supplies: wood chips, baled straw, bags of dog chow, and all kinds of training equipment from show leads to traffic cones for heeling in figure-eight patterns. One wall was covered with plaques, ribbons, and rosettes from the competitions Holly's dogs had won. Most of the prizes had been awarded to a dog she had co-owned with Peter Wilson. Named AKC Champion Famous Acre's Black-Hearted Pirate, and called "Blackie" for short, he was the only U.S. dual champion in decades, and had sired up-and-coming contenders, too.

Which meant that Blackie had looked gorgeous in a show ring, but at field trials he'd retrieved shot birds out of difficult and confusing terrain like some magical beast, and if you think this combination is easy to achieve in a breeding program, I can only invite you to try it; it is about as likely as winning the Irish Sweepstakes, only a good deal more work.

The puppies shoved their faces into the gruel bowl while their mother inhaled her breakfast and agitated to be let out. She was a grey-muzzled old bitch, sagging from her final stint at puppy production, but with a beautifully shaped head, kind eyes, and a sweet, biddable temperament.

"Go on, Bumbles," I told her, letting her out with the yard dogs. "You've earned a little relaxation."

As the animal trotted off, Kelley Greene's old white pickup truck rattled up the driveway and slammed to a halt, and the young woman swung out in a towering temper.

"Damn that man," she exclaimed, stomping up the steps to the back door. "It's like trying to talk to a stone."

"Albert Russell," I guessed, following Kelley inside. The kitchen was fragrant with the smells of bacon and eggs, toast, and a pot of fresh coffee, all keeping warm on a hot tray; from her wheelchair, Holly blinked innocently and lit up a forbidden cigarette as I filled my plate.

"Yes, damnit, Albert Russell," Kelley fumed, pouring herself a mug of coffee. Kelley was tall, fair, and athletically built, with a thick braid of flaxen hair like a crown on her perfectly proportioned head. As tall as most men, even in jeans, boots, and a flannel shirt, she looked so much like a Valkyrie that when she was angry, I almost expected thunderbolts to fly out of her fingertips.

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"How do you people put up with Albert?" she went on. "He's like some evil force. Of course, he isn't as mean to you as he is to me. I'm just a lowly kennel helper."

Holly and I glanced at one another. Blackie had died a year earlier at a local dog club meet when someone had tossed a poisoned tidbit into his exercise pen. Nobody had actually seen Albert do it, but with Blackie out of the way Albert's dogs began winning honors they hadn't had a shot at before, and rumors about the incident had flown thick and fast. But Kelley had been in the middle of a meanly contested divorce then, and hadn't been paying attention to dog-club gossip.

"I told him," Kelley said agitatedly, "I'd take that old dog Beau off his hands so he wouldn't have to have him put down. I just love that dog. But Albert said he'd still feel too much responsibility. Can you believe it? Responsibility! The man doesn't know what the word means."

She slammed her mug into the sink. "Anyway, I've got to get started. Rita, can you call the house dogs inside? I'll pick up the yard and let the boarder dogs out as soon as I've fed them."

"Picking up the yard" was Kelley's euphemism for scooping you-know-what, a chore that got done twice a day around here and one I'd have expected her to dislike. But Kelley said she'd taken so much you-know-what from her ex-husband, she could get a job sweeping up after elephants in a circus and still feel that the you-know-what level in her life had substantially decreased.

Also, she was very efficient at it, which gave me about ten minutes to get the dog room vacuumed, the water bowls freshened, the sleeping crates swept out, and clean newspaper placed for the younger animals, some of whom didn't have their bathroom habits down pat yet; once Holly's dogs were in, I would have time to get the kitchen floor mopped. In an hour, boarder dogs would begin arriving and leaving, and by then the place had to look shipshape enough to make the animals' owners feel comfortable about leaving them, which to Holly meant so clean that a brain specialist would feel right at home doing neurosurgery on one of the grooming tables.

The rest of the morning flew by: The dishes got done, the puppies got their kennel cough inoculations, and Holly managed to get herself into the shower with only a little assistance from me; a plastic lawn chair and a hand-held shower nozzle preserved her from that dreaded indignity, the bed-bath. And by ten o'clock, the

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new boarders were checked into the boarding kennel: Yogi was a gentle, intelligent mastiff who stepped into his enclosure quietly; inside, he accepted a dog biscuit and lay down to munch thoughtfully on it. Jiff and Tuffy were Jack Russell terriers, bouncy and resilient as a pair of bright rubber balls; they thought kenneling was an adventure devised specifically for their amusement. Only Mitzi, the cocker spaniel, showed surliness, a result of being awfully spoiled. Her idea of a good time was piddling on a rug, and everyone disliked her, or everyone except Kelley, who at the first snotty growl out of Mitzi's throat seized Mitzi by her silky scruff and shook her assertively.

"Bad dog. No growl." Snapping a lead onto Mitzi's collar, Kelley popped the dog smartly into heel position, whereupon the animal's snarl faded to a look of relief, and she sat happily.

"She doesn't like having to be the boss," Kelley explained to Mitzi's startled owner, a fortyish businessman with thinning blond hair and a worried expression. "She just feels it's her job to try."

Somebody's got to, Kelley's own expression added, but she did not say it; the poor guy was clueless.

"Y-yes. Well," he ventured, "it's nice to see that someone can control her. I must confess, she's quite a handful when she is at home with me. Barking, chewing things up, and so on."

"Control her, my Aunt Fanny," Kelley said when he had gone. "What does he think she is, a Bengal tiger? I think I'm going to bring old Mitzi, here, to obedience class with me this afternoon. That's what she needs."

Mitzi's eyes grew round as a bulldog's and her ears perked up alertly; if she could, she'd have uttered the word *Yikes!* But she couldn't, so Kelley led her away to the kennel area, and not a moment too soon, as just then the shower in Holly's bathroom hissed off, Peter Wilson's truck rumbled up the driveway, and the telephone in the kennel office began ringing again.

It took me eight years to become a veterinarian, and two more to discover that I'd made a mistake. I liked the animals all right; it was people who got under my skin, treating their pets as if they were humans in fur suits and then wondering why the animals didn't respond the way they wanted them to. Soon after the accident, I retired, having built up my practice and sold it for a tidy sum; I wasn't rich, but with that and the insurance settlement

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from the driver of the truck that hit me, I wasn't going to be poor any time soon, either.

Which was why, when Holly had her accident, I was there to help with the chores, one of which was overseeing Kelley Greene's first time at teaching afternoon obedience classes.

"Keep moving!" Kelley called to the frightened-looking beginners grimly parading their dogs around the perimeter of the training hall. "Loose lead, everyone; remember that nobody likes to be dragged, and above all, keep the dog's attention!"

"She treats them," said a gravelly voice from behind me, "like utter morons. Which I suppose is what they are, but it's so annoying to have to listen to it."

"Why do you, then?" I inquired. Albert Russell was a tiny, delicately built man in his early thirties, only five feet tall or so and weighing perhaps a hundred pounds. With his short cap of very pale hair and his small, manicured hands like the well-kept paws of some fastidious rodent, he did not look likely to provoke much else but astonishment at his diminutive stature. But Albert's fragile appearance was deceiving: He had an ego like a mountain and the social graces of an avalanche to go with it.

"That's one of Beau's puppies," he replied, pointing at a yellow six-monthster. Albert's kennel churned out Labrador puppies like a factory; he'd kept poor old Beau at stud until the animal's hips got so bad he could barely walk, much less carry on a doggy romance. Meanwhile, of course, Albert felt free to criticize everyone else's breedings to anyone who would listen.

"I told the pup's new owner I'd have a look at the class," he said, "to make sure Kelley stays on track."

And, of course, to squelch any confidence the pup's owner might be developing in Kelley, who from what I could see was a talented teacher with plenty of enthusiasm and a sincere love for the dogs, not to mention patience with the human students. But that was Albert: Cutting other people down apparently made him feel bigger. It was a common fault in humans of any size, but one Albert had raised to the level of an art form.

"About turn!" Kelley called, and most of the owners and dogs reversed and headed in the opposite direction, all except for one poor unhappy human being and his confused samoyed, both of whom dropped out of the parade to watch.

"No, no," Albert shouted, though he had no business interfering. "Don't quit now. Your dog will lose confidence in you if you do."

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The man reddened, but otherwise acted as if he hadn't heard. Kelley, too, ignored Albert's astonishing rudeness, while I tried to think of something, anything, that would shut Albert up; it was the man who was in danger of losing his confidence, not the dog. But the only way of silencing Albert involved a great big cork, and unfortunately I didn't have one.

Luckily, another situation distracted him: Outside, Peter Wilson's backhoe roared as he finished up the dry-well hole. Next he would lay pipe and place a catchment basin, and tomorrow fill the hole in with gravel and cover it.

"Poor Peter," Albert said with barely disguised relish. "He was absolutely broken-hearted over Kelley, you know. Personally, I don't see the attraction. But I felt terrible about having to tell him."

"Tell him what?" On the training floor, Kelley had coaxed the samoyed and its owner back into the group and was showing them all how to practice proofing the sit-stay, using a little mechanical animal. The dogs sat, the owners commanded them to stay, and the toy was set loose to skitter across the floor. The idea was to tempt the dog to break the stay, correcting if it did and praising if it didn't.

"Why, what would happen if he married her, of course," Albert said. "He did have a right to know, and it was obvious she wasn't going to tell him."

Most of the dogs in the class tried to chase the small, battery-powered creature, which clapped a pair of tiny cymbals together as it jittered along on fuzzy pink legs. Another toy, also equipped with cymbals but rolling on wheels, scooted in from the opposite corner of the training floor, pulled along by a length of yellow twine that Kelley tugged at strategic intervals, trying to get the dogs to disobey their owners' commands. This gave Kelley the chance to demonstrate humane corrections, which she proceeded to do.

Slowly, I turned to regard Albert, whose face with its long, thin nose, bright eyes, and narrow lips over small, closely spaced teeth resembled that of an inbred collie.

"A humane correction," Kelley Greene told her students, "is strong, fair, and understandable. It lets the dog know *that* he has done something wrong, and *what* he has done wrong. It is not administered so long after the fact that the dog can't understand why he is being corrected; it is administered *at the time.*"

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"I don't understand," I told Albert. "What *would* happen if Peter married Kelley? And how would you know anything about it?"

Albert smiled, looking as wise as he could; the collie he resembled had an overbite. In my opinion it also had a case of distemper that required immediate quarantine—or, under ideal circumstances, euthanasia. But that was another story, at least for the moment.

"I have my ways," he said. "And what would happen is, her alimony would stop. Poor child, she must have been wild to get rid of him. Her ex-husband, I mean. You see," Albert told me, speaking slowly and clearly as if I were the child, "her alimony ends if she marries again. She would be, in a word, penniless."

Outside, Peter Wilson worked his backhoe. He wasn't exactly penniless, but he didn't have many more than two of them to rub together, and I knew his kennel was in financial trouble. I wondered if he'd told Kelley the real reason he'd broken up with her, or trumped up some lie guaranteed to be even more wounding.

"Is that legal?" Kelley's alimony agreement, if Albert's account was true, sounded like something out of the Dark Ages, although almost everything about marriage sounds like something out of the Dark Ages to me.

"It is if you sign it," Albert informed me sweetly. "It is if you're desperate enough, or foolish enough, to sign it."

"Okay, everybody, that's it for today," Kelley called. "All of you have done very well, and I'll see you next week. Practice those recalls, and remember, no unearned biscuits!"

There was a spattering of applause, and the human students began struggling to lead the pulling, panting canines out of the arena in at least some semblance of good order. It's not so much obedience training itself that defeats a lot of dog owners; it's getting the animal in and out of class, an embarrassing, highly discouraging project for many of them until the dog "gets it." "You mean I have to obey here, too?" you can practically hear the animal asking, and sometimes it takes awhile for the human being to answer the question clearly enough.

Albert hurried to catch up with his puppy owner, no doubt so he could rip the daylights out of everything Kelley had done and said in the previous hour, and when Kelley saw Albert she strode after him, probably to try to argue with him about Beau some more. I could have told her it was useless; Kelley loved the old Labrador retriever, but he was definitely past his prime, and when Albert

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wanted an animal put down, the animal got put down.

Kelley wouldn't have listened to me about that, though, and anyway I didn't get a chance to say anything to her, because when Peter spotted Albert across the yard, he yanked the hand brake on the backhoe and jumped down with fire in his eye.

"I saw what you did, Albert," he shouted as he approached, stepping rudely in front of Kelley. Peter was dark-haired, hot-tempered, and more than a little impulsive, but he was a fervent dog enthusiast and a good fellow at heart, or so I'd thought until now. At least he'd always seemed willing to help when someone needed him, as Holly did at the moment.

"I saw what you did to that animal!" he shouted. "Did you think I'd just turn a blind eye?" he raged at Albert.

"Peter Wilson, have you lost your mind? What in the world are you yelling about now?" Albert put on his battle face: that of the reasonable victim, mildly querying the (again) irrational attacker.

"I am talking," Peter grated as the departing students glanced back curiously, "about beating a dog. Hitting it with a stick, Albert, to punish it, until it howled and lay down. I'm talking about the field trial training yesterday when your Maxie went after the wrong bird, and you know it, too."

"Oh, really." Albert rolled his eyes. The dog club put on training trials so members could practice for the real events, where dogs would compete for hunting titles; being title-hungry, Albert never missed one of these training sessions. "And why, if I was being so cruel to a dog, have you waited until now to scold me about it?"

I glanced at Kelley, whose tipped head expressed curiosity and suspicion. Albert's words sounded confident but his voice sounded nervous, and I thought Kelley heard it also. This wasn't the first time someone had confronted Albert about hitting a dog; as with the poisoning of Blackie, though, no one had been able to prove anything.

"Because you hustled the dog into your van and drove away before I could knock your block off, that's why," Peter Wilson retorted. "And you hung up on me, last night *and* this morning, when I called. Damnit, it wasn't even a correction, you just got mad at the mistake and took it out on the dog, didn't you? Isn't that what you did?"

"Peter," Albert said in a tone that made me want to do more than knock his block off; it was the tone of someone who is going to get away with something, if only he can brazen it out. And

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Albert was an expert at brazening things out. "Peter, you've been smoking those funny cigarettes again, haven't you? You ought to stop; after all," he went on in a voice loud enough to be heard by all, "you've already been to jail once. I should think that would have been enough. And aside from what the stuff does to your memory, a man with a felony conviction can't be too careful, now, can he?"

"You're the one who'd just better be careful, Albert! You'd better watch your step!"

With a few words, Albert had reduced Peter to idiot rage; it was Albert's own very special talent. Getting into his van, he drove out of the yard as Peter went on bellowing.

". . . next time I see you," he shouted, "I *will* knock your block off! I'll bash your skull in, Albert!"

And that was how, in front of many witnesses, Peter Wilson threatened to kill Albert Russell, not that anyone really thought of it exactly that way until about sixteen hours later.

Scratch a woman who loves dogs, somebody clever once said, and you'll find a woman who's been disappointed by a man. It was true of Kelley Greene for the rest of the afternoon after the obedience class; seeing Peter lose control of himself the way he had, even if it was in defense of an animal, didn't do anything to raise her opinion of him. Instead, it rubbed her nose once more in the realization that he wasn't the man she'd thought he was.

For the remainder of the day, she hurled herself into her work, taking each boarder dog out for an extra run, giving all the grooming equipment a more-than-thorough cleaning, wiping the whelping box down with disinfectant and disassembling it to stow in the rafters of the puppy palace. Holly had asked her to come back and stay overnight, to give me a break from the early-morning routines, but when Kelley's old white pickup rattled down the driveway that afternoon, I almost wished she wouldn't return at all; her intense unhappiness gave me a headache.

Peter, meanwhile, dug that dry-well hole like a demon; the gravel around the catchment receptacle needed to settle, he said, but otherwise it was ready to be finished in the morning, and covered with topsoil. He took off soon after Kelley, turning down my offer of a cup of coffee and refusing to meet my eyes until the last minute.

"I was telling the truth, you know," he blurted then. "Albert

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beat that dog. He shouldn't be allowed around animals. If he could do it once, he'll do it again."

"Lodge a complaint with the club," I suggested. "Bring him up on charges."

The dog club dealt harshly with anyone who abused an animal: fines, expulsion, even permanent banishment from competition, a punishment that would cut the heart out of the ribbon-coveting Albert Russell.

But Peter just shook his head. "My word against his. He wouldn't even get a slap on the wrist." His gaze darkened. "And he deserves *much* worse than that."

Peter was right; it was why no charge had ever been lodged against Albert. To make it stick, you needed more than a story; you needed testimony from someone without an axe to grind. And Peter definitely had one of those.

"Peter . . ." I hesitated; it was none of my business. But I had always liked Peter so much, I just couldn't believe that what Albert had said about him and Kelley was true.

So I asked him. "Albert told me you broke up with Kelley when you found out she'd lose her alimony if she married again," I said. "And forgive me, but I . . ."

For a moment, I thought Peter was going to hit me. "Oh, he said that, did he? I suppose he gave you the lowdown on my big drug conviction, too, didn't he? Told you all about what a rotten louse I am, ruined what little reputation I've got left? Damn the man; *damn* him."

He swung away from me, so blind with anger I was afraid to let him get in his truck. "No, Peter, wait. It doesn't matter; I only wanted to . . ."

To what? I asked myself, later. To stir the you-know-what? But the damage was done; he slammed the truck grindingly into reverse and screeched backwards, nearly slamming into the row of trees that stood like the crosspiece of a capital T at the top of the driveway, parallel to the back of the house. Then he sped away who knew where to do who knew what. All I knew was, it wasn't going to be good.

A few minutes later Albert called, sweet as pie, wanting to know if I could come over and give Beau his final shot. He was, Albert said, a good boy but he was in chronic pain, and Albert knew I would make the dog's death easy.

Which was a crock. Beau had outlived his usefulness, first

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achieving his titles, then becoming an important stud dog whose progeny had put Albert's kennel on the map. But now, although Beau's hips had always cleared x-ray easily—hip x-rays are the main way of ensuring that a dog does not have hereditary hip disease, a major problem among purebred animals—his hips were breaking down.

I thought that with steroids and painkillers, Beau could have another few decent years of life, but it was not my decision to make. Handing the dog over to Kelley was also a reasonable plan. She could provide a fine retirement home for him, and I knew she adored the animal. But Albert was adamant. Beau had lived with Albert, and would die with him; it was Albert's duty to the dog.

Maybe so, but it was also a way of getting Beau out of the picture before his hip troubles became common knowledge and damaged Albert's reputation as a breeder. I'd done Beau's x-rays myself and cleared the resulting films, but not everyone was going to believe that; the dog world was rife with instances of fraud and trickery.

Reluctantly, I told Albert I would give him a call in a few days to set up an appointment for my visit. I wasn't looking forward to it, but on one count Albert was correct: I would make it easy for the dog. I'd made a point of learning to do animal euthanasia in the kindest, most caring manner possible; if there was a canine heaven, Beau would be in it without even noticing that anything unusual was going on.

Just before dinner, Kelley returned with some eighty-pound bags of kibble that Holly had sent her for. Watching out the kitchen window, I observed her hefting the first of them easily from the bed of the pickup and carrying it into the puppy palace. She looked happier than she had, confirming my opinion of the effectiveness of hard physical work as an emotional painkiller. But when she came in, I knew something else must have happened. No amount of work could have put that look of triumphant elation on her face.

"Albert changed his mind!" she practically sang as she stowed two empty kibble bags alongside the trash can. "I just saw him, and he's going to let me have Beau!"

"But . . ." I turned from the stove, puzzled.

"I know, he wanted you to put him down. He told me all about it when I stopped at his place a little while ago. But I talked him out of it!"

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"With what, a tire iron?" Holly inquired, rolling her wheelchair into the kitchen doorway. "Albert takes suggestions about as gracefully as a beagle takes housebreaking."

"Well," Kelley admitted, "I didn't exactly talk him out of it. I made a deal with him. I offered to work for free for him next fall when he goes on the show circuit."

I felt my eyebrows rising nearly to my hairline. It was obvious why Albert would accept the offer; going on a show tour was an enormous amount of work, what with transporting the dogs, grooming and caring for them on-site, and keeping straight all the administrative details. What I couldn't see was why Kelley would agree to do it, the more so with the dreadful Albert.

"I know," Kelley said. "You think I hate him, especially since he told Peter how broke I'll be if I get married again. But better I should find out now what a jerk Peter is than later."

Her face grew stubborn. "And I want that dog. He deserves more than the life he's had. And if this is what I have to do to get him, I'll do it, and that's that."

"Well, more power to you, then," said Holly. "Personally, I think a trip to the mailbox with Albert is all the aggravation I could take, but I guess if things get awful, you can always keep that tire iron handy."

I found Holly's remark amusing; I'd often thought Albert needed a smack on the head.

But it wasn't so funny the next morning.

The rain had ended, but all that night the wind thumped and rattled in the roofs of the dog runs outside my window. I tossed and twisted, waking enough to know what time it was, then sinking to sleep again, over and over, my dreams full of the accident, as always. And of what came after.

I lied about not remembering the explosion. I remember it in nightmares: the astonishing sense of being lifted, captured and carried along on a hot, mushrooming burst of air. Something red and yellow whirling alongside me, bright as a child's pinwheel. Then the treacherous air flinging me to earth, slamming what remained of my breath out of me.

I remember the fellow in the yellow slicker, slamming down beside me. Behind us, the van burned hotly. Bits of glass and pieces of metal rained down. The fellow in the slicker didn't move, and when I dragged myself nearer to see why, I saw that a chunk

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of the van's windshield had taken most of his throat out, releasing a fist-sized gout of blood that flattened and slowed to a dribble, even as I watched.

If I'd taken another route, if I'd left five minutes earlier or later, if I hadn't been hypnotized in the final instant by the sight of the truck arrowing at me like some huge, malignant insect, then he might still have been alive.

Or if I hadn't been drunk. Not falling-down loaded; just moderately anesthetized by a couple of morning belts against the miseries of the coming day: being lonely, disliking my work, all those things. And of course I'd had a hangover, and a hair of the dog always helped, or so I thought then. But by the time the ER people tested my blood alcohol, which they do for all road trauma victims, I'd had so many transfusions that I was stone cold sober, so nobody ever knew.

They found my severed foot near the fellow's right hand. He'd gone back for it in case it could be reattached, as of course it later was.

I woke as if rising up from a drowning episode, wishing for Shala to come in and keep me forbidden company. The clock said 3:30 A.M. Outside, the wind had picked up again, flapping a loose tarp over some lumber Holly had stacked behind the puppy palace and whistling in the chain-link fence. From somewhere else came a rhythmic clinking, tinny and faint; a moment later the dogs began barking, raising an unholy ruckus as if all the burglars in the world were trying to get in.

I was halfway out of bed when everything stopped: The wind died, the odd clinking faded—if indeed it had ever been there; the sound might have been one of the metal gate latches tapping a fence support—and the dogs, grumbling, resettled themselves. I lay back and stared at the ceiling, praying for daylight and the salve of work, the simple forgiveness of dumb animals.

When I opened my eyes again it was seven o'clock, and Kelley Greene had just found Albert Russell lying atop the catchment receptacle out in Peter Wilson's nearly completed dry-well hole.

"The dogs barked," I said. "At three-thirty this morning. We all heard them." Kelley and Holly nodded.

"Anything else?" The police detective looked at all of us, gathered in the kitchen.

"No," I said. "Just the wind rattling things around. But these

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dogs don't bark at just anything. Not at any of us, for example; only strangers. You, for instance; you must have heard them when you came up the driveway."

It was true; Holly's property felt isolated, being set far back from the road, but she did have neighbors, and keeping a lot of barking dogs on the place would have been a quick way to get her kennel license revoked. The boarder dogs, because they were exercised individually, simply tended not to bark much, and the house dogs got a shot with a high-powered water pistol whenever they flapped their yaps without good reason.

The police detective nodded, turning to Holly. "What about a Mr. Peter Wilson? I understand he's been doing some work for you. Do the dogs bark when he comes around?"

"Yes, but listen," I put in, "Peter didn't mean what he said to Albert yesterday. He got Peter annoyed — Albert was good at that — and Peter popped off at him, but . . ."

The detective frowned. "Seems that in addition to Wilson's other grudges against Russell — something about a poisoned dog and alleged abuse of another one? — Mr. Russell had been talking to some bank managers about Mr. Wilson. Let them know Wilson wasn't going to be getting some windfall he'd been counting on."

"Oh my god," Kelley said softly, looking horrified.

The detective nodded. "So they'd decided to foreclose on him instead of waiting longer for the money he'd been promising them. Seems that when Mr. Wilson gave up the dope trade, he lost a major portion of his income. And doing favors for people," the detective concluded, "doesn't pay the rent."

One of the ambulance guys peered in the door. "All done out here." They'd loaded Albert's body after officers had combed the area around the dry well for anything that might be evidence. In particular, they were looking for Albert's keys, which so far hadn't turned up.

"Okay," the detective told the ambulance guy, "thanks. I'll just be another minute." He closed his notebook.

"So the upshot is," he said to the rest of us — me, Holly, and Kelley, plus an assortment of dogs who wandered into the kitchen, nosed at the detective, and wandered out again, "the upshot is, Mr. Wilson was angry at Mr. Russell, with fair reason. He threatened Russell yesterday, in front of a number of witnesses."

"Yes," I put in again, "but that doesn't mean—"

"And," the detective added significantly, "Wilson's truck was

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seen leaving Mr. Russell's property yesterday evening, after Miss Greene here had visited Mr. Russell. No one was seen going in or out after that."

"But if Albert was alive when Peter left, then Peter couldn't have—"

"Wilson didn't say Russell was alive when he left." The detective was swarthy and rumpled, wearing a wrinkled shirt and a loose, stained tie that suggested he'd been watching a few too many *Columbo* episodes. On the other hand, he'd absorbed the greetings of a dozen dogs with equanimity, so I couldn't dislike him too much. I disliked what he said next, though.

"Mr. Wilson says Mr. Russell's house was shut up, that the dogs were in their kennels and the doors were locked, but the van was parked in the carport. Not a light on anywhere, Wilson says."

"Somebody might have picked Albert up," said Holly. "If he'd been going out for the evening with someone else."

"Maybe," responded the detective. "But nobody did. At least, not anybody we've been able to talk to. And it seems to me if that's what happened, Mr. Russell would have left a light on so he could see to get in when he got back. And he'd have taken his keys with him. Only, it seems like he didn't."

The implication was clear: Peter had been lying. Albert had been home when Peter stopped by the house, and Peter had killed Albert, then closed the place up to make it look as if Albert had gone out on his own. Sneaking up here to put Albert's body in the dry well would have been a clever move — Peter had, after all, been planning to fill that dry well first thing today — except that while Kelley had been out picking up the yard this morning, she had glimpsed something like a dead squirrel or a raccoon caught in the corner of the chain-link fence near the dry-well hole.

And since the last thing a purebred dog should be eating is the carcass of a dead, possibly even rabid wild animal, she had gone to investigate, discovering Albert's body in the process.

"Have you . . . have you arrested Peter?" Kelley ventured.

The detective looked satisfied. "Read him his rights and sent him downtown for booking. You ladies want to take my advice, you'll get somebody else to fill that dry well in for you. In my opinion, your friend won't be back for quite some time."

And that, it appeared unhappily, was that: Peter had bashed Albert's head in, just as he'd threatened, and now Peter was in jail. And that was where matters would have stayed, were it not

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for the vagaries of the canine digestive system, in particular the reliable, generally predictable food-processing apparatus of the Labrador retriever.

"Hello," I said irritably into the telephone when it rang a little while after the detective had left. Then I listened with interest for a moment. It was Albert's kennel helper, a stolid, unimaginative young man whom I'd met on several uninspiring occasions, whose major virtue seemed to be that he worked cheaply. Now, though, I wasn't so sure of that, as he described what he had observed in Albert's kennel yard that morning.

"So," the kennel helper concluded, "I thought I'd, like, call you. 'Cause I thought maybe you'd, like, come over here. Like, to see what's going on with them."

Based on what he'd told me, I thought going over there was a very good idea, indeed. So I, like, did.

I once had a Labrador who ate a whole bucket full of bait fish. The only untoward consequence was a cut on his rear end from a swat with the fisherman's cane pole. On the other hand, I have seen Labradors roll over and perform the death scene from *Cleopatra*—not dying, but giving a damned good imitation of it—on account of a minor change in their kibble: from eighteen to twenty percent fat, say, or from four to five percent fiber.

I didn't know what to think when I saw Albert's dog yard, though. Picking up wasn't going to take care of it, that was for sure. What it needed, actually, was a fire hose; these dogs' guts really didn't like something they had been eating recently.

"I put 'em in separate enclosures," the kennel kid told me when I had finished inspecting the revolting situation. He'd limped over quickly when he saw me arrive, not in pain but as if one of his legs was shorter than the other, and slightly twisted.

Typical Albert. He'd be quick to hire the handicapped if it meant he could pay less in wages, which from the look on this kid's face, I was willing to bet it had: not shifty, but as if he didn't think much of himself and didn't expect anyone else to, either.

"Like, if it's only some of 'em sick, we can know which ones, that way," he explained.

"Good thinking. Have you fed them?"

He nodded. "Half rations. The food's in a bin in the kitchen. I smelled it and it, like, seemed okay. Not rancid or anything."

The dogs themselves moved around their enclosures cheerfully

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enough. You can pretty much tell by the look on a Labrador's face whether it feels icky or not, and these didn't; even old Beau, a big handsome chocolate guy with none of the pale eye or snipy muzzle that mars so many chocolate Labs, was chipper if a bit stiff. My opinion of the kid went up another notch.

"Okay. Maybe I'll have a look at that food myself, though. I guess you can finish cleaning up the yard."

"Yeah." He hoisted his shovel and bucket.

Inside I found the dog-food bin, a wide, shallow wooden receptacle that held nearly two eighty-pound bags' worth; Albert bred dogs in a big way, with about twenty adult animals on the premises, and they ate a lot of food. The bins' contents smelled sweet and fresh, just as the kid had said, and I saw no sign of infestation in it. I did see, though, why the dogs had gotten tummy upsets: The food in the bin was not Albert's usual brand.

Rolling up my sleeve, I plunged my hand to the bottom of the bin and grabbed a handful from down there. Withdrawing the sample, I discovered that the food at the bottom of the bin *was* Albert's usual kind of kibble.

Which meant that sometime recently the bin had been almost empty and someone had filled it with nearly two bags of the wrong brand of dog food: the brand Holly used, to be precise. And based on what I'd seen outside, I had a feeling that whatever wouldn't fit into the bin had gone instead into the dogs, a Labrador retriever being the world's most efficient disposer of anything even remotely edible, whether it is its usual food or not.

I headed for the door, then changed my mind and took a stroll through the house. There was just the chance that I was wrong, and something poisonous had been left around for the dogs to get into.

Nothing had, though. Like most dog enthusiasts, Albert had been a stickler for cleanliness and order; like many of them, too, he'd had a fair amount of disposable income. The place was beautifully done in Early American antiques, each piece polished and without a speck of dust; the floors glimmered, the windows gleamed, and the air smelled of soapsuds and lemon Pledge.

In the pine-paneled office stood a desk, a chair, and a file cabinet. On the desk lay several checks, signed by Albert and clipped to the bills they were meant to pay, all ready to be put into their envelopes. The walls were covered with ribbons, rosettes, and photographs of Albert at various dog shows, posing with his current

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canine super-achiever. Over the years, he'd campaigned a dozen or more dogs, each time with great success, especially in field trialing and obedience competitions.

I happened to know that he achieved his training feats with an electric collar — operated by a hand-held remote control, it zaps the dog when he fails to obey a command — a method I think is more than a little bit like operating a Robby the Robot toy. It works, though — in fact, it concentrates the dog's attention wonderfully — and unlike beating a dog with a stick, it is not against the rules.

Go figure. In the file cabinet I found a manila file folder for each of Albert's purebred dogs. Each folder held the dog's documents: eye exam registration, hip clearance certification, the lineage of both parents, and the animal's AKC registration papers. For dogs he had bought, there was also a bill of sale; animals he sold, of course, would have taken their records along with them.

Except for Beau, whose full name (his AKC papers said) was Am/Can Champion Ringolevio's General Beauregard, plus a string of initials testifying to his prowess at just about anything a dog could attempt. Besides the usual, he was a Canine Good Citizen, a titled Schutzhund competitor, the winner of two nationally advertised dog-food-sponsored beauty contests, and a registered therapy dog. If they'd let dogs onto the track at Indianapolis, I thought, Albert probably would have bought a stock car for the animal.

Instead, he'd been going to put Beau down. The bottom line was, when a dog outlived his usefulness at winning things, he was finished in Albert's book, especially if the dog also had hip trouble.

At least, Albert had been going to put the dog down until Kelley changed Albert's mind. In Beau's folder, along with his certificates, registrations, and commendations, was a fresh bill of sale with Albert's name signed at the bottom of it. In consideration of work to be performed later (schedule attached), Kelley Greene owned AKC Ch. Ringolevio's General Beauregard.

Which meant Albert must have done up the bill of sale after Kelley left, or she would have taken it with her, and (obviously) before somebody murdered Albert. That took Kelley off any possible list of suspects, in the unlikely event more suspects were needed; Kelley had what she wanted out of Albert, and I believed Kelley when she said she didn't hate Albert for breaking up the romance with Peter. She'd had one rotten marriage already and

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escaping another seemed only to have provoked relief, not a desire for revenge.

Musing over this, I went back outside and found the kennel kid finishing the yard cleanup. "One thing, though," he said. "Everything was locked up this morning when I got here, but I got, like, keys for the whole place? Which is how I let the cops in when they showed up? Except for that building over there."

He pointed at a metal building like Holly's puppy palace. "He—Mr. Russell—never let anyone have a key to that. He kept that key on his own ring, on a loop he snapped on his belt. He was, like, kind of paranoid."

Right, the way Einstein was kind of smart. Albert thought everyone was plotting mischief against him, probably because he was almost always plotting it himself.

I peered in one of the windows of the storage building. In it were all the same things Holly had in hers: kibble bags—of Albert's usual brand, not the alien variety I'd found in the food bin—plus more trophies, training equipment, cleaning supplies, and tools, all lit from above by an enormous skylight. There was a weaning pen in the building, too, and that made me feel uneasy; from where I stood, I couldn't quite see into it.

"Then after the cops, some other guys came," the kid went on. "They were supposed to, like, fix the heater? Only they couldn't, because I couldn't let them in there, either. An' I been, like, wondering what to do about it."

The kid eyed me sideways, apparently hoping I would come up with a solution where he hadn't been able to. I put my hand against the windowglass: warm. Too warm, and none of the windows was open an inch. "Are there puppies in there?"

"Uh, yeah. Seven-weeksters. I tried breaking the lock, but no luck. And the glass, it's reinforced or something? So it's, like, not breakable. They're big enough, so they'll be okay for a while, but . . ." He frowned, waiting for me magically to fix this situation.

I looked around, and damned if there wasn't a nursing bitch locked up in one of the dog enclosures, which meant those pups had been in that building alone since before Albert was murdered. The kid was right: At seven weeks, under ordinary circumstances, they'd survive for a while, maybe until we found a locksmith with a diamond hacksaw for the carbon-steel padlock Albert had put on the door.

But these weren't ordinary circumstances. The building's other

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door had no outside handle at all; inside, it possessed a latch and a crossbar made from a solid length of 6 x 6 timber. A battering ram might get through it. Eventually.

And it was hot in there. Too hot. I had an awful idea. "Get a ladder," I told the kennel kid, and ran back inside to the telephone.

One locksmith's line signaled busy; on another I got an answering machine. The third was disconnected, and the fourth was answered by a Spanish-speaking lady who did not understand a word I was saying.

Desperate, I dialed Holly's number and Kelley picked up. Swiftly, I described the problem to her. "So did the cops find Albert's keys?" I asked. "Because if they've got them, I need them right away over here."

"No," Kelley replied. "They even dug out a lot of gravel, but they didn't find them."

"Damn; okay, Kelley, thanks anyway." So much for that idea.

"You know what, though," Kelley said thoughtfully. "I wonder if they looked for them at Peter's. I mean, in his truck or around his house. They might not have had time for that yet, and I do still have a key to Peter's place."

"Do it, and bring them if you find them. I've got some pups over here that I think are slow-cooking, and I haven't got much time." I hung up.

By the time I got back outside, the kid had the ladder set up against the building. The roof was pitched, but not at a suicidally steep angle, and a set of wooden steps led down from rafters on the inside, adjacent to the skylight which I'd noticed was closed but unlocked.

Even getting a window open would help, but once the kid got inside, he could open the other door. "Okay," I told him. "Now you just climb up there and . . . oh."

He was shaking his head, pointing to his gimpy leg. "No can do. Sorry, but I've tried stuff like that and it didn't work out too well. The ladder, okay, but not the roof."

I nodded resignedly and started up the ladder myself. A fear of heights is not among my afflictions, and although my own ankle was stiff, the rest of the leg worked; what with the rehab they'd put me through after the reattachment, I could probably have bent steel bars with it. So I made it across to the skylight okay; I would probably have made it down the skylight okay, too, except for the threadlike wisps of smoke curling from around the edges of

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it as I reached it. Squinting through the glass, I caught a glimpse of orange flame, licking treacherously toward the bales of straw stacked in one corner of the building.

Albert's damned malfunctioning heater had caught fire.

All the courage drained out of me like blood from a severed artery, replaced by something as paralyzing as embalming fluid. Small flames skittered up the back wall of the building, fed by the rosettes and ribbons there.

"The gas!" I shouted down to the kid, who did not yet know what was happening. "The gas cylinder for the heater, outside by the rear wall. It has a valve—shut it off!"

He blinked, got it, and ran as best he could, while the metal roof of the building heated under my hands. I pried up the skylight and fell back, nearly losing my footing as a choking billow roiled up out of it. And then the whole nightmare burst into my waking memory, like some vile creature battering out of its loathsome egg: The explosion, a white-hot hammer of fire, nailing a spike of glass into the throat of the fellow in the yellow slicker who had saved me. His blood, spraying through the air while he tumbled as if weightless; his eyes, so darkly knowing. Begging, pleading with me to help him.

But I had already killed him.

"It won't turn! I can't shut off the gas!" The kid's voice seemed to come from a far distance. Below me, puppies coughed and whimpered in fright, their nails scratching the wooden sides of the weaning pen.

The roof was too hot to stay on any longer. I turned, meaning to return to the ladder; I wanted to save those puppies, but I wasn't going to kill myself to do it. Then, from the corner of my eye, I glimpsed something yellow.

For an instant, I thought it was a yellow slicker, and the idiotic thought crossed my mind that perhaps he was here, that he hadn't really ever died at all. But when I turned, I saw it was only a piece of yellow cloth, a cleaning rag or a dishtowel, fluttering—or I thought it was; I couldn't make it out clearly—on Albert's clothesline, in the utility area by his back door.

The fellow wasn't alive. He'd died saving me. I had taken him out of the world and he wouldn't be back, which left me not a hell of a lot of choice as to who was going to do any saving that needed to get done around here. Or so it seemed at the time.

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Which was why, finally, I climbed down through the skylight. As I descended, the smoke thickened until only the puppies' crying let me find them at all. With my eyes streaming and my heart pounding in terror of the fire at my back, I stuffed the creatures into a burlap sack and staggered toward what I prayed was the building's back door. Wind whistled in the skylight opening, sucked in by the flames that had already devoured the straw; now they began crackling in a stack of two-by-fours, flickering up the steps to the rafters.

The beam barring the door wouldn't budge. "Drag the hose over," I yelled, gagging on smoke and not knowing if the kid outside could hear; not knowing, either, what was going to be in flames in the next few instants: the rest of the building, or me.

Somehow I got my shoulder under the beam and lunged upward; a bolt of pain like a hammer hit me, but the beam moved. Gripping the sack, I fell against the door and it swung open, the rush of air fanning the fire to an inferno as daylight dazzled, blinding me.

Then I was outside and the kid was grabbing me, urging me along. "I got the valve closed," he shouted, "but it's gonna . . ."

The building blew, flinging us to the ground where we covered the sack of squirming puppies with our bodies against the rain of debris. In a few moments, nothing remained but a smoking shell, with two-by-fours and wooden steps burning merrily inside.

"Wow," the kid said, sitting up. "You okay?"

"Yeah," I said, wincing. "Shoulder's killing me, but I'll live. How about the pups?"

He opened the sack. Vigorous yelping from within signaled they were okay, too. "I'm gonna, like, put 'em with their mom," he said. "They ain't completely weaned yet, so she can take care of 'em better'n we can."

I thought that if my opinion of this kid notched up any more, we were going to have to build a pedestal for him. Albert might have been a lot of unpleasant things, but he knew how to pick kennel help. The kid clambered up and limped away with the pups toward the dog enclosures, where the wire fence had protected the animals from shrapnel. I got a glimpse of the yellow thing, whatever it was, still fluttering and waving near the house, and then an old white truck pulled into the driveway and Kelley got out, her eyes enormous.

"Oh my God," she said, staring at the burning wreckage. In the

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distance, I could hear fire sirens approaching. "I found the keys at Peter's place," Kelley said, holding them out to me, "but I guess you don't need them anymore."

"Right," I said. In the slanting sunlight, Kelley looked healthy and beautiful as always: tall and athletic in jeans and a plaid shirt, pale hair coiled atop her head.

"The police found a bloody rock in the back of Peter's truck just after I got there," she said. "It really looks like he killed Albert."

"Right," I said again, getting up. "Ouch. Give me a hand, will you?" Gripping my elbow, she hoisted me easily.

By then the firetrucks were pulling in, the yard filling up with shouting men carrying fire hoses. The kennel kid was moving the dogs out of further harm's way, and he seemed to have things well under control, so I got out of there before more vehicles could arrive to block the driveway off completely, as it seemed to me there were some things I needed to check on in and around Holly's kennel.

Being in terror for your life is a lot like an electronic training collar: It really does concentrate the mind wonderfully.

Back at Holly's, I looked hard at her bottle of pain pills, then shook out a couple of aspirin instead, and washed them down with a few gulps of diet soda. Then I took a walk around the place, thinking about Albert and Peter Wilson.

It didn't make sense for Peter to have killed Albert; he had already done his worst to Peter, losing him his kennel and his reputation, breaking up his love affair, and shaming him in front of a lot of people who would be sure to remember and talk about it. Peter might have killed Albert to prevent Albert from beating any more dogs, but that seemed an unlikely motive when so many less extreme methods remained to be tried. A really serious formal complaint to the dog club might at least have put the brakes on Albert's tendencies, just by putting him on notice. And Peter, once his fury abated, would have realized that, too.

On the other hand, he might have bashed Albert in a rage, which was, after all, the emotion Albert was best at eliciting. Peter had threatened Albert, his truck had been seen leaving Albert's place, and an obvious weapon had been discovered in the truck bed. Then there was the fact of Albert's body being found in the dry-well hole. It would have been perfect if not for the dead animal Kelley thought she had seen, in the far corner of the dog

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yard. Fifteen inches of gravel plus half a foot of topsoil, and *voilà:* instant grave.

And the dogs had barked that night, as they never did at familiar people. But they would have at Peter, who had been an infrequent visitor until the dry-well project.

The trouble was, they'd have barked at other things also. And Albert wouldn't have switched that dog food, at least not all at once. He'd have mixed it with the dogs' old kibble a little at a time, adjusting the proportions at each feeding over the span of perhaps a week, to avoid digestive upset.

I followed these ideas out to the puppy palace, where I found a cone of yellow twine and the two toy dogs from obedience class—one mechanical, one on wheels—on the training shelf. Sadly, I cut a long length of the twine and knotted one end of it through the metal loop on the wheeled toy dog's chest.

Then, to try my experiment, I carried the toy to the bottom of the driveway and left it there, hidden in some tall grass. By the time I got to the top of the drive again, I felt the weight of the world on my shoulders, and it stayed there while I walked behind one of the trees Peter had nearly hit the day before, then turned right so that the string formed a right angle: one leg of it parallel to the driveway and the other parallel to the back of the house.

Continuing on that line, still unwinding twine, I went on through the gate in the chain-link fence and along the back of the house until I was standing below the window of the room Kelley Greene had stayed in the night before. A bit of yellow fuzz the same shade as the twine clung to the outside of the window sash; there had been a wisp of it on the tree bark, too.

From their enclosures, the dogs watched, their pretty heads cocked in varying degrees of curiosity as I began pulling in the string carefully—this was the delicate part—and after a moment I heard it: the little toy dog's metal cymbals clinking together, faintly and then more audibly, as—pulled by the length of twine—the toy was drawn up, up the driveway. It was the same sound I'd heard the night before, thinking it was the chain-link fence gate clinking in the wind.

Only it wasn't: not then, not now. The animals in the pens stood up and pricked their ears up. I pulled the twine again: more clinking. The dogs went wild, just as Kelley Greene drove up in her pickup truck with Beau in the seat beside her.

She got out and looked at me, and she knew, but I didn't think

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she would run and she didn't. All this—the kennels and animals, early mornings and chores, the dogs and the variety of human beings who owned them (or, in some cases, the reverse)—all this was Kelley's life. And I could see in her eyes that she knew what I had learned for myself, to my sorrow, a year earlier: As she had ruined her life in this little place, she had ruined it in the entire world.

"So that Peter Wilson guy, he didn't, like, really kill Mr. Russell?"

It was six in the morning of the following day, and I was out with Albert's kennel helper, picking up Holly's dog yard. The evening before, we'd brought Albert's dogs over and closed up his place; the kennel helper, whose name was Geoffrey, needed a job and we certainly needed him, what with twenty more animals rambling around the property, and I liked Geoffrey. Meanwhile, I'd started Beau on a regimen of steroids, painkillers, and gentle exercise—plus a little obedience work so he wouldn't get bored, mental stagnation being the bane of the retired dog's existence—all of which he seemed to be tolerating nicely.

And Kelley Greene had turned herself in to the police, her confession and arrest being accomplished at almost the same time as Peter Wilson's release. I'd explained it all at least twice already, but Geoffrey hadn't heard everything, yet.

"That's right," I told him as we finished our cleanup and started on the boarder dogs, herding each one into its own large pleasantly airy roofed enclosure. Holly took good care of her guests.

"Kelley went to Albert's that evening to try again to persuade him to let her have the dog she wanted. But Albert was dead set on putting Beau down. They had words about it, out in Albert's dog yard, and when Albert turned his back, Kelley picked up a rock and bonked him with it."

"Mr. Russell was a little guy," Geoffrey observed astutely. "Small enough so you could, like, sort of stuff him most of the way into a dog-food sack, then pull another sack over the open end of the first one, to hide him. That's why the dogs'd had different food: because Kelley needed two sacks."

"Precisely. And Kelley is a big, powerful woman. Next, she printed out a bill of sale for Beau, and forged Albert's signature by copying one of the signed checks on his desk. Then she carried Albert into Holly's puppy palace under everybody's nose, and slipped out later to dump him in the dry-well hole. She even put

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the two empty sacks in the kitchen afterwards, right in plain sight."

"Phew," Geoffrey said. "That's a lot of work just to get an old dog." He shooed a little papillon into its enclosure, then grabbed it up and cuddled it briefly before shutting it into the pen. "Go on, now," he told it, and it yapped happily at him.

"I don't think Kelley planned to kill Albert," I said. "I think Albert just made Kelley lose her temper for a minute. We all," I added quietly, "do things we regret later."

"Yeah," Geoffrey agreed. "But once she'd done it, I guess she didn't feel she had, like, any choice. So she blamed it all on Peter Wilson?"

"Uh-huh." I lugged a couple of water buckets to the faucet at the back of the house, dumped them, and began refilling them with fresh. Ice-cold water soaked my shoes; it always does. Wet feet are among the delights of being a big-time dog enthusiast.

"During the night, to strengthen the notion that Peter had been here, Kelley got the dogs to bark by pulling the toy past them; she'd set it up earlier so she wouldn't even have to leave her bedroom to do it, and the next morning she pretended to see a dead animal so she could 'find' Albert's body. Later, when she went to Peter's house to ask the cops about the keys — she had them all along in case she needed to get back into Albert's, but she couldn't very well tell me that — she put the bloody rock in Peter's truck bed."

Geoffrey considered this while we dragged the buckets to the various dog enclosures, fastening each handle to the chain-link with a metal snap so the dogs wouldn't tip the buckets over. He remained silent as we scooped wood shavings from the weaning pen in the puppy palace and put in clean shavings, and while we spread fresh straw in the muddiest areas of the dog yard; it had rained again the night before.

Not until we had finished the outdoor chores and gone in for a cup of coffee before starting the indoor tasks did he speak again. "That was, like, pretty good what you did. Going in that building when you knew it was probably going to explode, to save those puppies. That was pretty brave."

Geoffrey's limp was due to a badly healed fracture he'd suffered in a pedestrian accident; he'd been hit by, of all things, the dogcatcher's van. I thought that when I got to know him a little better, I might refer him to my own orthopedic surgeon, possibly

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along with a check to help with the expenses of getting the leg straightened out. After all, I did have a fair amount of money, and that seemed like a good way of spending some of it.

"No," I said to Geoffrey, "it wasn't brave."

Outside, one of Holly's dogs grabbed a scrub brush I'd left on the back step and raced into the dog yard with it, and the others chased after him; moments later they all were covered with mud, and I knew I would be hosing down a dozen Labradors before the evening.

But first there were puppy meals to be fixed and the crates in the dog room to be vacuumed out, exercise areas to be picked up and a crew of boarder dogs to be welcomed or sent home. There were grooming tools to be used and cleaned; field, obedience, and show-ring classes to be held. And there were dogs to be lived among, to be learned from and loved: labor enough for a lifetime, or so I hoped.

"Actually," I told Geoffrey, "I was only repaying a favor. Or starting to; I think it'll take a long time to finish. Or I might never be finished."

Geoffrey just nodded. He was a good kid; worth more, I thought, than whatever Albert had been paying him. I made a mental note to speak to Holly about that, and then I went back to work.

And that would have been the end of the story, except that later the same day I stopped back at Albert's for some of his special-blend puppy chow, so as not to switch the new pups' feed too abruptly. And although I looked carefully for it, and the police had removed all the things they needed much earlier so I didn't think they could have taken it, there was no yellow cloth or anything like one on Albert's clothesline, or anywhere else. ●

—with gratitude to Constantine Cavafy (1863-1933)

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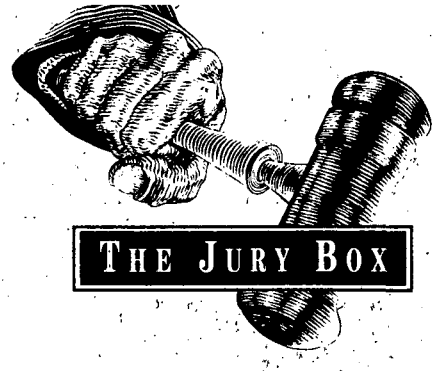

by Jon L. Breen

A clutch of recent anthologies offer a feast for short-story fans. *Spooks, Spies, and Private Eyes* (Doubleday, $22.95), edited by Paula L. Woods, is one of the most significant retrospective collections in years. Woods traces the contributions to crime fiction of African-American writers like Rudolph Fisher, George S. Schuyler, Chester Himes, Richard Wright, John A. Williams, and Hughes Allison, whose celebrated "Corollary" *(EQMM,* July 1948) is not only probably the first tale of a realistic black detective in mainstream American media but a strong early example of the police procedural. There are also new stories from contemporary black mystery writers: Hugh Holton's intriguing futuristic satire, "The Thirtieth Amendment"; Gar Anthony Hayward's cleverly plotted and stylishly told Aaron Gunner story, "And Pray Nobody Sees You"; Eleanor Taylor Bland's cleverly titled "The Man Who Said I'm Not," which unfortunately bases its solution on found evidence rather than detection by Marti MacAllister, and new cases for Mike Phillips's Sam Dean, Gary Phillips's Ivan Monk, and Percy Spurlark Parker's long-established but too-seldom-encountered Bull Benson.

In the "dark suspense" subgenre, mystery and horror meet with often brilliant and always calculatedly disturbing results. *Dark Love* (ROC, $22.95), edited by Nancy A. Collins, Edward E. Cramer, and Martin H. Greenberg, leads off with "Lunch at the Gotham Cafe," a new Stephen King novella that leaves no doubt why he is possibly our best and certainly our most successful contemporary storyteller, and also includes strong stories from John Lutz, George Chesbro,

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Ed Gorman, and especially Stuart M. Kaminsy, whose "Hidden," an award-worthy psychological-study-cum-semi-inverted-detective-story, is fresh evidence of his remarkable versatility.

The first dozen winners of the Private Eye Writers of America's Shamus Award for best short story are gathered by PWA founder Robert J. Randisi in *The Eyes Still Have It* (Dutton, $21.95). All are well worth reading, some relatively conventional, most (see especially those by Rob Kantner, Ed Gorman, and Nancy Pickard) highly unusual in structure or subject matter.

The latest anthology drawn from *EQMM* and *AHMM* is good value as usual. *Murder by the Book* (Carroll & Graf, $20), edited by Cynthia Manson, has a theme of literary mysteries, with contributors ranging from Dorothy L. Sayers and James Thurber to Bill Pronzini and Margaret Maron. Mike Ashley's 532-page *The Mammoth Book of Historical Detectives* (Carroll & Graf, $9.95) is even better value on a cost-per-story basis, but I'd have preferred a more permanent hardcover format for such a notable collection. Along with reprints from Steven Saylor, Robert van Gulik, Edith Pargeter (Ellis Peters), Lillian de la Torre, Basil Copper, and others are several originals, among which John Maddox Roberts's "The King of Sacrifices" shows he can keep pace with fellow Roman specialists Saylor and Lindsey Davis.

The inclusion of all five Edgar nominees (a strong group including two from *EQMM* and two from *AHMM)* and the Dagger Award winner, Ian Rankin's clever and amusing "The Deep Hole," accounts for much of the eight-story overlap between Edward D. Hoch's *The Year's Best Mystery and Suspense Stories 1995* (Walker, $22.95) and *Mystery Scene* magazine's fourth annual *The Year's 25 Finest Crime & Mystery Stories* (Carroll & Graf, $21.95). *Year's 25* also has the other Dagger nominees, while *Year's Best* includes among its fourteen selections the Robert L. Fish Award winner for best first story, Batya Swift Yasgur's "Me and Mr. Harry," a real chiller as *EQMM* readers know. Marcia Muller and Ed Gorman make both volumes with *different* stories. *Year's 25* has more wordage and this reviewer's introduction, *Year's Best* Hoch's invaluable bibliographic appendix and necrology. Trust me. You want both.

Ed Hoch found so much to like in 1994's output, he skipped the customary inclusion of one of his own stories in *Year's Best,* but

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check out the new Simon Ark story, "No Blood for a Vampire," an exotic tale with one of Hoch's most bizarre solutions, in *Vampire Detectives* (DAW, $4.99), edited by Martin H. Greenberg. Notable in the same volume is William Sanders's publishing-industry satire, "The Count's Mailbox."

*** Donald E. Westlake: *Smoke*, Mysterious, $21.95. The master of humorous crime does a nice job of skewering he hypocrisy of the tobacco industry in the course of offering his take on a classic science fiction situation: the Invisible Man. The story of thief Freddie Noon considers aspects of invisibility unexplored by H. G. Wells. While I believe 450+ pages is too long for most crime novels and comic novels of any sort are best kept brief, Westlake is exempt from both strictures.

*** P. C. Doherty: *An Ancient Evil*, St. Martin's, $21. We all know what Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims told each other in the daytime, but the prolific Doherty's new series will recount, beginning with The Knight's Tale, the more mystery-oriented stories they came up with at night. A series of crimes in 14th-century Oxford, including vanishing students and horribly murdered residents, suggest the activities of the Strigoi, a legendary vampire cult. The account has more horror and less detection than the author's usual, but is told with his customary gusto and effectiveness.

*** Mary Higgins Clark: *Silent Night*, Simon and Schuster, $17.50. On Christmas Eve in New York, seven-year-old Brian Dornan sees a woman pick up his mother's wallet and gives chase — the wallet contains a lucky St. Christopher medal to be given to Brian's father, who recently had cancer surgery. The resultant suspense situation is played out in typically adept fashion if lighter on plot twists than a full-scale Clark production. The sparely told short novel might work even better as a film than as a book.

** Joseph T. Klempner: *Felony Murder*, St. Martin's , $23.95. New York lawyer Dean Abernathy takes on the defense of a homeless man accused of felony murder when the New York Police Commissioner dies in the course of an alleged robbery. This first novel will provide plenty of fun for conspiracy thriller fans, but it doesn't live up to its early promise of a first-rate legal procedural. The tale ends with some preposterous heroics and an incredibly over-the-top melodramatic (and movie-ish) climax.

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Man on the Run

by Bill Pronzini

When Harry Dice finally caught up with me I was in Washington state, working the cranberry bogs on the Long Beach peninsula.

It was mid-October and I'd been there nearly three months, at least a month longer than it was safe to stay in any one place. A big mistake to hang on that long, but there were reasons why I'd done it. I was tired of running, that was one. Another: I hated having to leave Anne, the first woman I'd cared anything about since Fay. Another: I didn't want to let Ev Cotter down; the cranberry harvest was due in a week, and the growers needed all the help they could get. Another: Long Beach was the first place I'd been in twenty-nine years of rambling and scrambling that felt like a home to me.

In recent decades the novel has been eclipsing the short story as a literary form to an ever greater degree. For author Bill Pronzini, however, the short story still holds the more powerful attraction. "I prefer short stories," he said in a recent interview *(LLWM)*. "Ideas are easier to come by, they're fairly simple to plot . . . and the creative process from conception to completion is relatively brief. . . . The best works of fiction I've written, I think, are short stories." This new story is one of more than two hundred he has written.

Cold, the morning Dice showed up. Blustery wind off the Pacific, whipping across the peninsula to rumple the surface of Shoalwater Bay. The land finger is fourteen miles long, but only about two miles wide for most of its length; if it weren't flattish and heavily wooded with pine and cedar, you could stand in the middle of it and see both the long stretches of beach on the ocean side and the Shoalwater and Willapa Bay shorelines on the inland side. The

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locals call it "Cape Cod of the West," because of its shape and the cranberries and a heavy summer population.

I was out in Cotter's bogs, on the slender levee road between #6 field and #7 field, finishing up the last of the mowing. The sunken bogs were all reddish stubble now, ready for next week's flooding and harvesting. The cranberry harvest is a big deal in Long Beach; 550 acres of cranberries are grown on the peninsula, almost ten percent of the entire West Coast production. I was looking forward to it. If you'd said to me three or four years ago that before I turned thirty I'd get a kick out of standing hip-deep in freezing water, scooping off floating berries with a long wooden paddle, I'd have laughed in your face. Rambling and scrambling changes people, I guess. Or maybe it's just that it takes some a hell of a lot longer than others to grow up.

I thought about Anne as I worked. She was a schoolteacher in Oysterville, the village on the northern tip; I'd met her in a supermarket two weeks after I hit Long Beach. And she was about as different from Fay as it was possible for two women to be. Anne was sweet, warm, gentle. Fay had been beautiful, hot, and hard—fire burning around a core of ice. Anne didn't smoke or drink; Fay had been a chain-smoker and an alcoholic. Anne did charity and volunteer work, cared about people, and wasn't much interested in the things money could buy. Fay hadn't given a damn about anybody but herself, took what she wanted when she wanted it, and loved the power of the almighty dollar as much as she loved Fay Dice.

With her it had been secret meetings and secret plans and body heat. With Anne it was movies, dinners, walks along the beach, sailboating on Willapa Bay—and a goodnight kiss when I took her home. I'd have laughed in your face once, too, if you'd told me a goodnight kiss and holding hands would be enough for me with any woman. It was best for Anne that things hadn't gotten too serious between us, but I regretted it just the same. And pretty soon now, despite how I felt, I'd have to leave her cold: no explanations, no goodbyes. It would hurt her, but what choice did I have? A man on the run—

"Hello, Maguire."

He said it loud, to make himself heard over the whine of the mower. I swung around and there he was, five feet away. Just standing there, all alone, watching me. Harry Dice.

A chill went up my back. In those first few seconds I had a crazy

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urge to cut and run, keep on running until he caught me or I dropped from exhaustion. But there was nowhere to go, not anymore. When the panic died I didn't feel much of anything. Funny. I'd had nightmares about coming face-to-face with him like this, and each time I'd woken up dripping with fear-sweat. Now that the moment had come, I wasn't afraid. The only feeling in me seemed to be a kind of distant relief that this part of it was finally over.

I shut off the mower. After that, neither of us moved for maybe a minute. Harry Dice. Bigshot criminal lawyer. Mob lawyer, with ties to one of the worst crime families in the Chicago area—but I hadn't known that until it was too late. I'd had contact with him less than a dozen times in Chicago, for about a minute each. We'd said less than a hundred words to each other; men like Dice don't have conversations with the attendants who park their cars. In my memory I'd built him up as a big man, imposing, powerful, a giant with eyes that could slice you up like knives—and he was none of those things. Just a middle-aged man in a camel's hair overcoat, hunch-shouldered, with saggy jowls and creases in his cheeks and eyes that were squinty and moist from the wind. Harry Dice in the flesh wasn't any less deadly; a little easier to face, was all, especially since he hadn't brought anybody with him.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," he said. His voice was powerful enough — he was supposed to be hell-on-wheels in a courtroom — but there was a flatness, almost a dullness to the words. He had every reason to hate my guts, but there was no hate in his tone. Maybe that meant something. And maybe it didn't.

"No. The odds were all on your side, Mr. Dice."

"Three years is a long time to keep running."

"I figured it was better than the alternative."

"Easier on both of us if you hadn't managed to stay one jump ahead of the detectives I hired. They came close to grabbing you twice the first year."

"Detectives?" I said. "Is that what they are?"

"What did you think they were?"

I didn't say anything.

"You never stayed anywhere longer than two months," Dice said, "and yet you've been here almost three. I wonder why."

"I like it here."

"Is that the only reason?"

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When I didn't answer he said, "Born in Chicago, weren't you?"

In a south-side slum. "You know where I was born, Mr. Dice."

"City boy," he said. "Urban environment most of your life until three years ago. I expected you to try losing yourself in a city, but the only one you've been to is Seattle for a couple of weeks."

"I guess I had enough of city living." And city people like Fay. And Harry Dice. And guys I grew up with who used crack and smack and died with bullets in their heads. And my mother, who never even knew my father's name.

"Cranberry bogs," he said, and shook his head. "There can't be much money in a job like this."

"Hardly any. But money isn't everything."

"You must have thought it was once, three years ago."

"Look, Mr. Dice—"

"Fifteen or sixteen jobs since you left Chicago, and every one menial. Took you two years to scrape together enough to buy that beat-up old Ford you drive."

"I never got any of that eighty-five thousand," I said. "Fay took it all when she left me. It burned up with her in the accident."

Noise had begun to fill the gray sky: honking and fluttering. It made Dice look up. Flock of Canada geese, flying in formation the way they always did, headed up over Shoalwater Bay for the wildlife refuge on Long Island. He watched them for a few seconds before he put his eyes on me again.

"I don't give a damn about the money," he said.

". . . You don't?"

"I never did."

"But I thought—"

"I don't care what you thought. Tell me, Maguire: Where were you when Fay died?"

My lips were dry from the wind; I licked them before I said, "On a bus halfway between Denver and Salt Lake City."

"So it was over between you and her by then?"

"All over. Finished."

"The car she was driving—you bought it in upstate Illinois in your name."

"I bought it, but she gave me the cash."

"And you let her take it in Denver. The car and the eighty-five thousand. Just like that."

"There wasn't any other choice."

His mouth opened, started to shape a word—the first one of a

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question, maybe. Then he seemed to shake himself. When he spoke again I had the feeling it wasn't what he'd been about to say before.

"The two of you didn't even last a week together."

"No, not even a week."

"How long were you sleeping with her in Chicago?"

"Six weeks. Seven. I don't remember."

"It meant that little to you?"

"It meant plenty in the beginning."

"Did it? Were you in love with her?"

"I thought I was. I mean that, Mr. Dice."

"Was she in love with you?"

"Same thing. She thought she was, or tried to talk herself into believing she was."

"Whose idea for the two of you to run off together?"

"Hers."

"Whose idea to take the money out of my safe?"

"Hers. I didn't know it was so much until we got to Denver. She said she was only going to take a small amount—five thousand or so to get us started."

"Would you have gone if you'd known how much she did take? Or if there'd been no money at all?"

I said, "I don't know," and the words put a thin, humorless smile on Dice's mouth. He knew that was a lie. The "five thousand or so" was the reason I'd let her talk me into going. Just that much was more than I'd ever thought I would get close to in one lump. Eighty-five thousand was too much; it scared hell out of me then and still did now.

Dice said, "Tell me the whys, Maguire. I need to know."

"The whys?"

"Why did Fay want to get away from me so badly? Why did she pick a man like you, a parking-garage attendant? Why any of it?"

"I don't know why she picked me. I was there, I guess. Available and dumb enough to be willing."

"You weren't her first lover, you know. She had at least three others."

I hadn't known that. But it didn't surprise me; it would have if I'd been the only one.

"But she didn't run away with them," Dice said. "Just you."

"She said she was afraid to stay with you. That's the reason she wanted out."

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The words seemed to sting him; he winced and hunched more tightly inside his coat. "Afraid of me? For God's sake, I never harmed or even threatened her. I loved her, Maguire—I mean I really loved her. You understand?"

"Yes, sir, I understand."

"I gave her everything she wanted. I treated her like a goddess. What did she have to be afraid of?"

"She let me think you abused her. She didn't tell me the truth until after we quit Chicago."

"Truth?"

"It wasn't you she was scared of—it was your clients, the people you work for."

"My God," Dice said.

"She thought you were in too deep. That's what she said. In too deep, and bound to make a mistake some day and then they'd hurt you. Or her to get back at you."

"She was wrong."

"Well, she didn't think so."

"My practice isn't like that. I've defended men involved in organized crime, yes, but I don't take orders from any of them. I'm still my own man. I'm not in jeopardy and neither was she."

"I'm only telling you what she told me, Mr. Dice."

"Why didn't she come to me? Tell *me* her fears?"

"I don't know. All I know is, she was afraid and that's what started her drinking so much, and all she could think to do was to get out before it was too late, start a new life somewhere else."

"With you and eighty-five thousand dollars from my safe."

"She figured she was entitled to the money," I said. "A settlement, she called it."

"Settlement," he said. Then he said, "What ended it between the two of you in Denver? What she told you about my law practice?"

"Yeah. That, and how much money she'd taken. For all I knew, you'd sent Mob enforcers after us. I didn't want any part of that. I still don't."

"So you were the one who wanted out."

"We both wanted out by then. I told her the smart thing was for her to take the money, all of it, and go back to Chicago. No matter how bad she thought things were with you, being on the run by herself would be worse."

"What made you think I'd take her back?"

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"She said you loved her, that was one thing she never doubted. You would've taken her back, wouldn't you?"

He didn't answer that. He said, "But she wouldn't listen, is that it? Hard-nosed Fay."

"Not at first. We argued about it for two days straight, both of us drinking too much, before I finally convinced her I was right. We split up the next morning. She took the car and the money and I caught the bus for Salt Lake."

"When did you find out about the accident?"

"Few days later. In one of the Chicago papers I got at a newsstand in Salt Lake."

"She was heading east when it happened. That's what the Nebraska state police told me."

"Yeah. She always drove too fast, even when it was pouring down rain. . . ."

"Rain didn't cause the accident," Dice said. "She was drunk. Three times the legal Nebraska limit."

That was something else that didn't surprise me. But I let it pass without saying anything. The wind gusted; it made a sound in the cranberry stubble like decks of cards being shuffled. There was a funny look on Dice's face, one I couldn't read, and when he spoke again it was in a low voice that I could barely hear above the wind.

"Where was she going, Maguire?"

"Where? To Chicago."

"*Was* she coming back to me?" That was the question he'd started to ask earlier; I knew it as soon as I heard it.

"Sure she was."

"What makes you so sure?"

"She told me she was and I believed her."

"Because you'd finally convinced her it was her only option. Because she was even more afraid not to."

"It was more than that," I said. "She still cared for you. She never stopped caring—I could see that all along."

"Did she say she still cared?"

"Yeah. One of the last things she said before we split up was, 'We made a big mistake, Jack. I hope Harry can forgive me. I still care for him, and if he still loves me after this, maybe the two of us can work something out. It's the only hope I've got left now.'"

He looked at me for a long time, while the wind fluttered around us and one of the other workers fired up a mower. Then his head

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came up and his shoulders lost their hunch; he seemed to stand taller, like somebody who'd had a heavy weight lifted off him.

I said, "I'm sorry about Fay, Mr. Dice. I'm not just saying that—I mean it. I'm sorry any of it ever happened."

"All right."

I took a breath before I asked, "So what happens now?"

"Nothing happens. You go back to work and I go back to Chicago."

"And later tonight I get a visitor or two? A bullet in the head, Mr. Dice? Or just a wheelchair for the rest of my life?"

"You sound like a character in a cheap melodrama."

"Well, what am I supposed to think? You spent three years and plenty of money to track me down. It wasn't so we could have a ten-minute conversation."

"Yes, it was," he said. "So I could ask you the questions you just answered."

"I don't . . . questions?"

"Why Fay left with you. Whether or not she was coming back home when she died. If she still had any love left for me. I had to know, Maguire. You asked me if I'd have taken her back. The answer is yes, in a second. I'd have forgiven her anything, even you, to have her back. I've spent the past three years learning to live without her, but I doubt I could go on many more years without something positive to hang on to." He saw the look on my face and added, "You don't understand, do you?"

"Maybe I do."

"No, because you've never loved a woman the way I loved Fay. But I really don't care if you understand or not. The fact is I don't give any more of a damn about you than I do about the money. I don't hate you, I don't blame you—I don't have any feelings at all toward you."

I didn't feel anything either right then, not even relief. Later . . . all that would come later.

His eyes weren't on me any longer. He was staring down into #6 field. "Ironic, isn't it," he said, and I think it was as much to himself as to me.

"What is?"

"That it should end here, in a place like this. Same kind of place we've been in for three long years, you and me."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Dice."

"I mean," he said, "we can both stop running now."

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And he put his back to me and walked away without looking back.

I quit the fields at five and drove straight to the motel in Ocean Park where I rented a room. I washed up, changed clothes, then lay on the bed and looked at the phone without picking it up. Anne would be home by now and I wanted to talk to her, but I didn't know yet what I would say. It didn't seem right, somehow, to just pretend nothing had changed, that today was the same as yesterday.

I felt the relief now, but nothing much else. No good feelings—just a kind of flatness. Three years. Three years of running, hiding, working at lousy jobs and living in lonely rooms like this one, and all Harry Dice had wanted was to ask me a few questions. He wasn't a killer or a Mafia bigshot on a vendetta; he was a poor sad bastard pining away for a dead love. Well, I'd made it easier for him and for myself in the bargain. I'd told him exactly what he wanted to hear.

The truth, partly. And half-truths and outright lies.

Fay hadn't been going back to him when she was killed on that rain-slick highway. She was still running—away from me as well as from him—and wherever she'd been running to, it hadn't been Chicago. She hadn't had any love left for Harry Dice, if she'd ever loved him in the first place. She'd hated him. That was the real reason she'd run off with me and his money. The last thing she'd said to me was, "I'll never let him find me, Jack, and you better not ever let him find you. I'd die before I'd go back to Chicago. I hate his damn insides."

I'd had to let her take the car; she threatened to call Dice if I didn't, tell him I'd forced her to go away with me, abused her until she agreed, and she'd run out on me because she was tired of being kicked around. He'd come after me with a vengeance then, she said, kill me himself—and I believed it. When she left, she thought she was taking all the money with her too. But she was wrong. The two minutes she'd spent in the bathroom before walking out had made her wrong. I'd been afraid she would take it into her head to call Dice anyway, blame everything on me, and I was damned if I would let her get away with leaving me holding an empty bag. I wasn't thinking straight. I hadn't started thinking straight until I got to Salt Lake City.

The eighty-five thousand hadn't burned up in the car smash; it

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had been with me on the bus, two hundred miles away. Almost the entire amount was in a bank in Seattle right now, earning interest, and had been even before I found out Fay was dead.

Three years, and all I'd spent of it was a few hundred dollars. I'd been afraid to spend more. Afraid Dice would hunt even harder if he thought I was living it up on his money. Afraid to send it back to him because what if I really needed it someday, to leave the country? Afraid all the time, afraid of everything.

But now I didn't have to be afraid. Dice really didn't care about the money; he'd had no reason to lie to me about that. It was all mine and I could do what I wanted with it. Spend it on Anne . . . except that Anne had no interest in money or what it could buy. And I couldn't think of anything I wanted to buy for myself either. Not a single thing.

That was the reason for the flat feeling. Admit it, Maguire. Dice didn't care about the money, Anne wouldn't care, and after three years you don't care either.

In my mind I could see Dice standing on the levee road, staring down into the cranberry field. And I could hear him saying: *Ironic, isn't it? . . . That it should end here, in a place like this. Same kind of place we've been in for three long years, you and me.* I hadn't known then what he meant, but I knew now. Bogs. The two of us like men running in a swamp, weighted down with baggage and going nowhere, and if we'd kept up the chase much longer we'd have been mired so deep we'd never have gotten out.

The money and the fear were my baggage, just like Dice's love for Fay had been his. I'd gotten rid of the fear—and I could get rid of the money too. Anne's charity work: Eighty-five thousand plus interest would do a lot of needy people a lot of good. I could tell her I'd inherited it . . . no. No. Tell her the truth, the whole story. No more lies, especially not to Anne. No more baggage.

I sat up and reached for the phone. The flatness was gone; now I had the good feeling I'd been waiting for all day. I didn't have to leave Anne or Long Beach. Dice had been right: We could both stop running. And I could start living again. ●

Erratum: Please note the following correction to the cover credits for *EQMM*'s October and November 1995 issues: The October cover was executed by Les Edwards, not Fred Preston; the November cover is the work of Greg Newbold, not Les Edwards. Apologies to our talented artists for the musical chairs.

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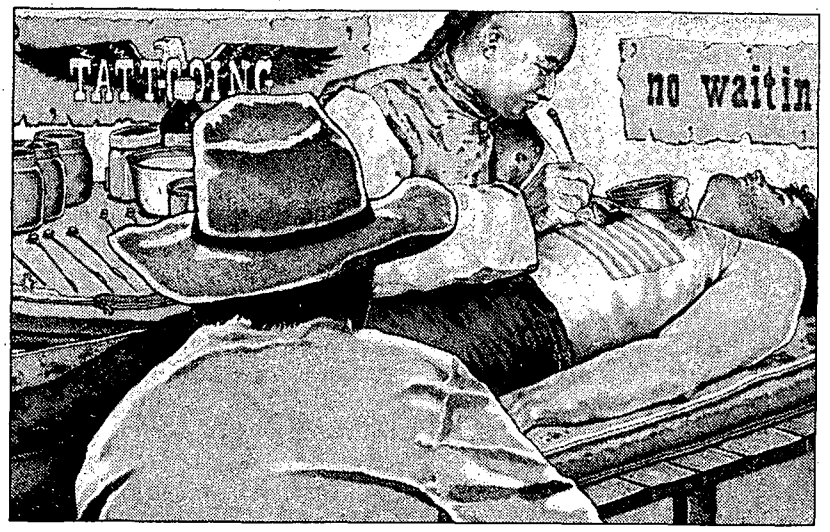

BANNER IN BLOOD

by Edward D. Hoch

On the summer of 1900 Ben Snow was beginning to doubt his ties to the West for the first time. A new century had begun and he was about to turn forty. Those were two good reasons for reexamining his life and perhaps settling down somewhere in the East. He was thinking about it as he rode north from Mexico in June, crossing the shallow Rio Grande near El Paso. There was a town here where he'd stopped before, with a friendly bar in which to pass a few hours.

The bar was called the Prairie Dog after a creature plentiful in that area, and it was unique in having a back room that served not as a bordello but as a tattoo parlor. A part-Chinese man called Joe Collar did the work and apparently made a reasonable living from his needles. Ben had spent a couple of pleasant evenings with him on previous occasions.

"Snow!" Joe Collar shouted when he spied Ben through the

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swinging doors into his parlor. "Come back and see me when you get your whiskey."

"Want one, Joe?"

"No."

"I'm buying."

"Got a customer in here. Don't want to scare him any more than I have to."

Ben picked up a shot of whiskey from a bartender who was new since his last visit and carried it into Joe Collar's tattoo parlor. The place contained nothing more than a long table with a thin mattress on which Joe's customers would lie during the procedure. If they noticed that the mattress was stained with blood, it didn't appear to matter. The implements of the tattooist's trade were spread on a side table—straight razor, a row of needles, a bowl of antiseptic, a sponge, a jar of petroleum jelly and another of black powder, and finally, dye pots of black, blue, green, red, and brown ink.

Tattooing is mentioned in writings as early as the Old Testament, which contains a proscription against the practice. In other cultures, such as that of the Maori of New Zealand, it has been developed into an exotic form of art. European sailors, returned from travels in the Orient, brought the technique to the West, where it has survived as a badge of certain subcultures. Here with an insider's view of the art is Ed Hoch's cowboy detective, Ben Snow.

Joe Collar himself was a short man with Oriental features whose speech reflected his Western upbringing. The profession of tattooing seemed to be the only holdover from his Oriental heritage. "Tattooing was popular in China and Japan long ago," he'd told Ben once. "In Egypt it was practiced four thousand years ago." He liked to joke and drink with the others around the Prairie Dog, but right now, with a customer, he was all business.

The man who was removing his shirt as Ben Snow entered was stocky and middle-aged with a few days' growth of beard. He brushed his hairy chest as he presented it to Joe Collar. "Right here is where I want it—an American flag."

Ben sat on a stool off to one side. "Mind if I watch?" he asked. "Name's Ben Snow."

The man shrugged and shook hands. "Go ahead. I'm Charlie Black."

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Joe Collar was showing him the sizes and designs of the flags available. "This here's a nice one I do for nine dollars. It'll cover your whole chest."

"Ain't you got anything cheaper?"

The tattoo artist pulled out sheets of paper showing hearts and flowers, peacocks and hula girls. "You want just a name, it's only a dollar. I can do a nice heart for two dollars."

The man named Black shook his head. "Gotta be a flag."

"You serve in the military?" Joe Collar asked, picking up the razor and going for a bar of soap.

"Nope."

"Hey, you're a man of few words, huh? This nine-dollar size okay?"

"This the only tattoo parlor around here?"

"That's right. Only one for three hundred miles." Ben knew he'd pulled the figure out of thin air.

The stocky man sighed. "Then I guess it's gotta be. Can you give me a bill showing the amount, and that I paid it? Someone's goin' to give me the money for it."

Joe Collar snickered. "Girlfriend likes flags, huh?"

"Naw, nothing like that."

From his stool Ben asked, "Ever get any women customers, Joe?"

"Sure. Sometimes the whores like roses on their butt. They think it gets them extra tips."

Charlie Black laughed as he climbed onto the table. He lay on his back and Joe Collar soaped his chest before shaving it with the straight razor. When it was hairless, he wiped away the soap and spread a thin layer of petroleum jelly over the man's chest. Then he took a sheet of heavy paper on which the details of the flag tattoo had been outlined in pinholes. He laid it on the man's chest, shook a quantity of the black powder over it, and pressed the powder through the holes. When he finally lifted the paper, an exact outline of the flag had adhered to the jelly on Black's chest.

"That's a clever job," Ben Snow admitted.

"I learned it in Frisco. Some places do it different." He picked up the first needle, dipped it in the antiseptic, and then in the black dye pot. "Lay still now," he told the customer. "You'll hardly feel it."

He began the arduous task of filling in the flag's outline with black ink. Tiny beads of blood could be seen on the surface as he

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worked, mixing with the ink. After more than an hour's steady labor, he was able to go on to the red stripes, and finally the blue field for the forty-five stars. He was wiping away more blood now, but the customer barely moved or spoke.

Finally Joe Collar straightened up, flexing his back muscles. "I have no white ink for the flag. I will use a little brown to show the flagpole on the left side, but white ink would look better than your skin color for the stripes and stars."

"I need the white ink," the man agreed. "It's not an American flag without the white!"

"Maybe I could borrow some from the printer."

"Do it!" Black insisted.

While Collar went off to the print shop down the block, the man on his back asked Ben, "How does it look so far?"

"Like a flag, except that it's a little bloody still. I guess it's what you wanted."

"I didn't want it. A guy's payin' me."

Ben shrugged. "We have to make a dollar any way we can. Does he just like flags?"

"Who knows?"

Joe Collar returned with a small jar of white ink. "This is a different kind but it'll do the job," he said. He set to work at once finishing the job. Ben went out to the bar for another whiskey and then rejoined them. He'd never watched a large tattoo being applied before. There was a certain fascination in the operation, though he had no desire to have one himself.

"There you are!" The little tattoo artist placed a piece of cloth over his creation. "There'll be a scab on it for a few days, but when that's gone it'll look perfect, like a real American flag."

"Thanks," Charlie Black told him, sitting up and sliding off the table.

"I gotta charge you an extra dollar for the white. That's what it cost me at the printer's. I'm not charging extra for my time."

"All right, give me a bill for ten dollars." He took some gold pieces from his pocket.

Ben left the bar shortly after the man named Black. He didn't expect he'd ever see the man again.

As it turned out Ben Snow found himself lingering longer than planned in the little town north of El Paso. It was a pleasant community and at night he had a good drinking partner in Joe Collar.

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A young woman named Molly Humber even gave him a job at her livery stable. "It's just temporary," she warned him.

"That's the only job I'd want."

Molly was about ten years younger than Ben, a fine horsewoman who could ride with the best of men. She'd taken over the stable when her father died a year earlier, but the actual management was left to a slow-witted cowpoke named Fitz. Right now Fitz was away for six months, but she was certain he'd return. Ben learned awhile later that Fitz was serving six months in the county jail for stabbing a man in a barroom brawl.

It was Molly Humber who told him about the A-Bar ranch just out of town. "Three thousand acres, and that's small by Texas standards," she said one day, making conversation while he was watering the horses. "Howard, the eldest son, has owned it since his father died a few years back. He was always a little wild but he's settled down nicely now. Owning three thousand acres of grazing land and hundreds of head of cattle woke him up to his responsibilities."

"I'm not familiar with the A-Bar. What's the family name?"

"Glendale. Howard Glendale. His father's name was Cain and his younger brother is Philip. He's a nice guy. Howard's nice too, but there's something calculating about him since he inherited the ranch."

"Is their mother still around?"

Molly Humber sipped some of the coffee she was carrying and shook her head. "Went back East a long time ago. Some women can't take the life out here. Lonely days interrupted by moments of sheer terror—that's how a woman I know once described it. Of course, she was speaking of those bloody raids by Mexican bandits."

He enjoyed their occasional conversations, and as the summer drifted on he was glad that he'd lingered here in southwest Texas. There was always time to go East.

The news of the tragedy at the A-Bar ranch came in August. "A terrible stampede," Molly told Ben. "They don't know what caused it. Howard Glendale was killed, trampled by the cattle."

"Not a pleasant way to die," Ben said.

"They say he had to be identified by a tattoo."

"Tattoo?"

She nodded. "His face was completely destroyed, but Howard Glendale had a large American flag tattooed on his chest."

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The wealthy rancher's wake was a major event, and carriages from El Paso and other nearby cities were familiar sights on the town streets during the next few days. A few of the new automobiles were even sighted as bankers and businessmen came out from the city to pay their respects. Ben Snow rode out to the ranch on his horse Oats the second evening, trying to keep him calm as they passed one of the chugging motor vehicles from the city.

The A-Bar ranch house was even more impressive close up than from the road. A wide veranda ran around the front of it, attracting a number of well-dressed men who smoked their cigars in the evening dusk as they spoke softly to each other. There was a large funeral wreath on the front door, which was opened by a servant as Ben walked up to it. Inside the crowded living room, the closed coffin was surrounded by flowers, and a slender young man stood beside it greeting mourners.

He shook Ben's hand and said, "I'm Philip, Howard's brother. Thank you so much for coming." His face was thin and his eyes somber. He wore striped pants, a formal dark jacket, and a white shirt with a string tie. Ben wondered if the ranch would all be his now that Howard Glendale was in his coffin.

There was a framed picture of Howard next to the coffin, a formal portrait taken at a studio sometime in the past. His face was fuller than Philip's and his hair was thinner, but one could see they were brothers. Philip was just a younger version. A handsome woman who'd been speaking with some of the other mourners came over to them. She was dressed in black and Ben surmised that this would be the widow.

"Mrs. Glendale, Howard's death was a terrible shock to us all."

She studied his face, trying to place him. Finally her pale blue eyes seemed to brighten. "You're from the town, Mr.—?"

"Snow, Ben Snow. I knew your husband only slightly but I admired him a great deal. I did some work for him once, stringing barbed wire. It was a hot summer day and we all had our shirts off. I remember that great flag tattoo on his chest."

"Odd that you should mention that. I always hated it. He got it six years ago, before we were married."

"Of course I didn't have to look at it every day," he murmured apologetically. "I heard there was a stampede. How did it happen?"

She sighed, obviously tired of repeating the tragic story.

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"He was out with Philip and some of the cowhands, rounding up strays. They had about sixty of them in a group when suddenly something spooked them. They started stampeding and Howard's horse threw him, right in their path. Philip tried to turn them by firing into the air, but it was too late. When he reached Howard my husband was dead."

"A terrible accident," Ben agreed. "Will you and Philip continue to operate the ranch?"

"There's been no decision on that," she said, turning away to greet other mourners.

He stood for a moment by the closed coffin, in silent prayer, then went back outside. That night he dreamed of a tattooed flag, speckled in blood.

The following day Molly Humber supplied Ben with some interesting information. "Some folks are saying Howard Glendale died just in time," she said when Ben mentioned attending Glendale's wake.

"Why's that?"

"It seems he'd defaulted on some big loans from El Paso banks, or was about to default. They could have seized the ranch."

"Won't they anyway?"

She shook her head. "I don't pretend to understand the banking business, but apparently they were personal loans, covered by life insurance policies. Now that he's dead, the insurance pays off the loans."

"Interesting."

When it was time for lunch, Ben decided to pay a call on Joe Collar. He hadn't seen the tattoo artist since Glendale's death and he was curious to learn what Collar thought about it. When he reached the Prairie Dog, however, the bartender told him Collar hadn't been around. "Sometimes he goes into the city on business."

Ben had been up to Joe Collar's rooms for a drink a couple of times and he headed for the apartment over the general store about two blocks away. "Joe been around?" he asked the clerk downstairs.

"Ain't seen him since day before yesterday."

Ben Snow mounted the steps to the second floor and knocked on the door. There was no answer. He waited a few moments before turning his attention to the lock on the door. It was a simple one

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and easy to pick, even for one of his limited skills. He entered the apartment, suddenly fearful of what he might find. But there was no body, no sign of a struggle. The bed was made and everything was neat. Ben checked the closet and found a pair of carpetbags. On a table near the door was a case containing inks and tattooing needles. It didn't appear that Joe Collar had planned any lengthy trips when he left.

Next he looked around the rooms for some sort of ledger or copies of invoices. Collar had given Charlie Black a bill for the flag tattoo and surely he'd kept a copy himself. But it wasn't there. It could only be in the tattoo parlor at the Prairie Dog.

The swinging door to Collar's quarters at the saloon couldn't be locked, but his wooden filing cabinet had a padlock firmly in place. It took Ben five minutes to pry it open. Yes, here were Joe Collar's invoices detailing the hundreds of tattoos he'd applied to residents and travelers passing through. He'd been meticulous about filing them by date, and Ben immediately flipped through the sheets to the day of the flag tattoo. There was no bill for Charlie Black, and no bill for a flag tattoo under any other name, on June eighteenth.

Ben went through the bills for a month before and a month after the eighteenth, figuring it might have been misfiled or that he might have been off a bit in his recollection of the date. Still there was nothing. There was no getting around it — someone had removed that bill from Joe Collar's files. Perhaps they had removed Joe Collar as well.

That afternoon the livery stable was busy. A few of the people who had ridden out from El Paso for the Glendale funeral had left their horses at the stable for one or two nights. "He was a popular man," Molly remarked as another horse was brought in.

Because he had no one else to talk to, Ben asked, "What would you do if you found out he was still alive?"

"Still alive? How could he be still alive?"

"The face was damaged beyond recognition."

"But he had that flag tattoo. Everyone knew about that." She seemed truly concerned by his question.

"Suppose someone else had the same tattoo, and was killed in his place."

"But—but that would be murder!"

"Sure," he agreed.

"Can you prove any of this?"

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"I was at Joe Collar's tattoo parlor back in June when he tattooed a flag on a man's chest. The man said someone was paying him to get it done."

"Who was this?"

"Said his name was Charlie Black. I haven't seen him since."

She shook her head, indicating the name meant nothing. "Have you talked with Joe Collar about it?"

"He's not around. He seems to have vanished." Ben didn't bother to mention the missing invoice.

"Why would Howard pretend to be dead?"

"You gave me the answer to that this morning. The banks were threatening to take the ranch. Now that he's been declared dead, his loans will be paid off by the insurance."

"Do you think his wife and brother are in on it?"

"They'd have to be, wouldn't they?"

She fell silent, apparently considering the possibilities. He could see that his theory had troubled her somehow. Finally she said, almost to herself, "He'd have to move away. He couldn't suddenly show up here after he'd been buried." She couldn't accept the idea of that. "No, he'd never do it, even to save the ranch. What good would saving it be if it could never be his again?"

"I suppose the two flag tattoos could be just a coincidence."

The conversation drifted to other matters and soon Ben went off with the wagon to get more oats for the horses. It was while he was loading the sacks that he remembered something: Joe Collar had been out of white ink for the tattooed flag. He'd gone down the street to the print shop to buy what he needed. If Collar's records were missing, perhaps the print shop people had made a note of it.

He parked his wagon in front of the shop and went in. A Mexican lad with a gold tooth was behind the counter. "You need printing?"

"Just information. Is the boss around?"

The kid grinned and showed a second gold tooth. "I'm the boss today. Pop's away."

"Fine. Back around the middle of June—I think the eighteenth—the tattoo artist Joe Collar bought some white ink from you. I need a record of that."

"What for?"

"To prove something." He slid a silver dollar onto the counter to show he meant business.

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The kid covered the coin with his hand. "Collar comes in here a lot to buy ink. I could look it up if it's important."

"It's important," Ben assured him.

The kid pulled a ledger from the shelf and flipped it open, turning the pages quickly until he found what he wanted. "June eighteenth, you say?"

"Right."

"White ink. He paid fifty cents for it."

Ben nodded. At least he hadn't dreamed the whole thing. "Were you working that day?"

The kid consulted a calendar. "Yeah, Monday. I'd be here."

"He needed the white ink for an American flag tattoo."

"Sure, I remember now. What about it?"

"Did he say anything about his customer?"

"No." Then, "Yeah, I remember now. He said the guy had come over from my hometown."

"Where's that?"

"Ciudad Juárez." It was a Mexican community across the bridge from El Paso, renamed not so long ago to honor one of the country's former presidents.

"What else did he tell you?"

"Nothing that I remember. He was in a hurry to get back with the ink."

"What else?" he asked again, taking out another coin.

"Give me a break, mister! It was nearly two months ago."

"All right," Ben said. He tossed the kid the second coin and left the shop.

He didn't know what had happened to Joe Collar, but he could take a good guess. The insurance swindle, if that's what it was, had been carried out, and because Joe had vital knowledge he had been removed from the scene, one way or another. An alternate hypothesis had Joe realizing he possessed vital knowledge and going into hiding to stay alive. Either way, Ben was the only person who could do something about it. But as an outsider he needed help.

Molly Humber listened to his story with interest but without much encouragement. "You're a stranger to these people and you said yourself they'd have had to be in on it. You think you're going to walk in on their wake and get them to open that coffin for you? Not a chance!"

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"I have to open the coffin to prove that Howard Glendale's still alive."

"Well, Ben, I wish you luck."

"I may not know them well. I only spoke to his wife and brother for a few minutes. But you know them. If you came with me you could help pressure them into opening it."

She smiled wryly. "Becca Glendale doesn't want to see me. She thinks I once had a dalliance with her husband."

He remembered the odd way Molly'd hedged his suggestions about Howard earlier. Perhaps this was the explanation. "Did you?" he asked with a grin.

"Oh, I suppose so. It was never as serious as she believed, though. Sometimes things get blown out of proportion in a small town."

"If you care about him at all, you must wonder whether he's dead or alive."

"Of course I wonder, after what you've told me."

"Then come with me."

Molly sighed. "When?"

"It has to be before tomorrow's funeral. I'd say tonight, after the final visiting hours."

"All right," she agreed. "I don't know what I'm getting myself into."

They rode their horses up to the A-Bar early that evening. Mrs. Glendale, wearing the same black dress, turned from her place by the closed coffin to greet them. Her face seemed to lose its color as she recognized Molly Humber. "Why have you come here?" she asked in a low voice. Across the crowded room, Philip had spotted them and started over.

"To pay my respects to your late husband," Molly answered. "If that's really him in the coffin."

"Really him? What do you mean by that?"

"My friend Ben Snow here believes he can prove that the man in the coffin isn't Howard at all but a stranger named Charlie Black."

"What's that?" Philip Glendale asked as he joined them. "What are you saying?"

"If you open the coffin I can prove the body isn't Howard's," Ben told him.

"I'm getting Sheriff Lawson. If you're trying to shake us down—" He went quickly to a bulky man wearing a sheriff's star on his

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jacket. The man listened quietly to Philip's complaint and came over to join them.

"What's going on here?"

"Nothing yet, Sheriff," Molly explained. "We just want them to open the coffin and prove it's really Howard inside."

"Who else would it be?"

"A man named Black who got a flag tattoo from Joe Collar back in June," Ben explained. "Now Joe's disappeared and the tattoo is the only thing proving that the body is really Howard's."

Sheriff Lawson shook his shaggy head. "We can't put the widow through anything like that."

"She wouldn't have to see. The undertaker could open it for us and Philip could witness it for the family."

"Visiting hours end in fifteen minutes," Philip said. "Let's talk about it then."

When the last of the mourners had departed, there were only six of them left, grouped around the fancy wooden coffin. Becca Glendale stood close to her brother-in-law, while the sheriff and the undertaker stood apart. Molly had taken one of the chairs along the wall, leaving Ben as the center of attention. "You've got some convincing to do," Sheriff Lawson said, "if you expect me to order that coffin opened."

"And I will convince you." Ben told them about the man Charlie Black whom he'd encountered at the tattoo parlor. He described the American flag Joe Collar had inked onto the man's chest, and even Black's insistence on white ink. Black admitted someone was paying him to have it done, he concluded.

"American flag tattoos aren't that unusual," Philip Glendale countered. "Black might have been on his way north, or down to Mexico. There's no evidence that he stayed in this area."

But Becca Glendale was frowning. "There was a cowhand named Charlie who worked here in June and July," she said. "What was his last name, Philip?"

"I have no idea. Howard always handled the hiring."

"Well, what happened to him? He was built like my husband."

"He was a drifter, I suppose. He drifted." Philip eyed Ben as he spoke. "You know these people. They work a few months to earn traveling money and then they move on."

"But suppose he didn't move on. Suppose he's in that coffin right now in place of Howard Glendale," Ben countered.

"How could you prove that?" the sheriff asked.

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"The flag tattooed on Charlie Black's chest was the current American flag, adopted July fourth, eighteen ninety-six, after Utah entered the Union as the forty-fifth state. I counted those forty-five stars myself."

"What are you trying to say?"

"Mrs. Glendale told me that Howard got his flag tattoo six years ago, before she married him. That means around eighteen ninety-four, when there were only forty-four states and forty-four stars on the flag. If we open the coffin and find a tattoo with forty-five stars, it isn't Howard Glendale."

Philip and the widow exchanged glances. "Do you have any objection if we take a look?" Sheriff Lawson asked.

"After what happened to my husband, I think he should be allowed to rest in peace," his widow said.

Ben could see that the evidence of the tattooed flag intrigued Sheriff Lawson. "It would only take a minute, ma'am. You could wait in the next room."

Philip took a deep breath. "Let's do it," he decided suddenly. "Come along, Becca."

"Philip—"

"It can be over in a minute and we'll know for sure."

"But you were there! Don't you know for sure?" Finally she allowed herself to be led into the next room as the undertaker started to unscrew the lid of the coffin.

Molly Humber arose from her chair and moved closer as the body was revealed. Ben and the sheriff bent forward for a look as Philip returned from ministering to the widow. The body was dressed in a shirt and jacket and string tie, with a black cloth laid respectfully over the mangled face.

"Just a moment," the undertaker said, unbuttoning the shirt.

For a minute nobody breathed as each of them silently counted the stars on the dead man's flag.

"Forty-four stars," Philip said.

"Forty-four," the sheriff agreed. "It's Howard, all right."

"That shoots your theory all to hell," Philip told Ben. Then, to the undertaker, "Close him up. He's ready for the grave now."

Ben and Molly rode most of the way back to town in silence. Finally, when lights began to appear, she rode up next to him. "It was a good idea, Ben. Howard was exactly the sort of man to try some sort of insurance fraud. I thought you were going to be right."

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"I've been thinking. Maybe I'm still right. Maybe Howard realized the possible error when he compared his tattoo with Black's. Maybe he paid a second man to get a flag tattoo."

"No," she said simply.

"Why not?"

"When I saw him I—Look, once when we were fooling around I bit him a little too hard. It bled and left a tiny scar. It's still there if you know where to look. That's Howard's body."

"Then what happened to Charlie Black?"

"A drifter, just like Philip said."

"If there was no attempt at some sort of insurance fraud, why did Black get the tattoo?"

She had an answer for that too. "If he was working for them, he probably saw Howard's flag tattoo and admired it. Maybe one of the other cowhands paid him to get one like it."

Ben admitted that was possible. Still, he didn't like loose ends. When he got up the next morning, while much of the town was attending Howard Glendale's funeral, he told Molly he'd be away for a day or two.

"Where you goin'?" she asked.

"Just drifting. I'll be back."

He saddled up Oats and rode into El Paso, avoiding the main streets with their automobiles and heading for the bridge to Ciudad Juárez. He was remembering what the Mexican boy at the print shop had told him about Charlie Black coming over from there. Perhaps he'd gone back the same way. Ben crossed the bridge to the Mexican side and rode down the dusty street to the first hotel. They had never heard of Charlie Black.

He spent the rest of the day and evening asking around the town, checking the little cantinas that lined the streets close to the border. At one place the bartender seemed to remember the name and even gave a passable description of Black, but he hadn't seen him in months.

The hotel where he stayed the night was next door to a noisy brothel. Shortly after midnight one of the young women came over to the hotel to knock on doors, seeking out lonely customers. "Come in!" he invited. She was a dark-haired beauty in her late twenties or beyond, flouncing her skirts as she entered.

"I am Maria," she told him, seeing that he was American. "I give you a good time."

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"You know a friend of mine," Ben said, making it a statement. "Charlie Black. He has a flag tattooed on his chest."

She shook her head, looking blank. "I do not know."

He gave her a silver dollar. "Ask the other girls. If anyone knows him, send her to me."

"That is all you want?"

"That is all."

About an hour later, as he was drifting into sleep, there was another knock on his door. When he answered he found a short, shy girl still in her teens. "Maria sent me," she said simply.

"Do you know Charlie Black?"

"The man with the flag. I have visited him twice."

"Where is he?" Ben asked, standing aside to let her in.

"Near here," she answered vaguely. "He fears for his life. He says someone tried to kill him across the border."

"Yes. This is a stocky, middle-aged man with a short beard?"

"No beard."

Of course not. They would have needed him clean-shaven even though the face would be disfigured. "But he had the flag tattoo?"

"Yes. An American flag right here." She indicated her own chest.

"Tell me where he is." Ben took a silver dollar from his pocket.

She hesitated. "You have not come to harm him?"

"No, but if he's using his real name, someone else might harm him quickly enough."

She reached into her blouse and handed him a folded piece of paper. "This is where he stays. He wants me to come again."

He handed her a second coin. "Thank you," he said simply, realizing he did not even know her name. "What is your name? I will tell Charlie I saw you."

"Carlotta. I will see him soon."

In the morning, still groggy from his interrupted sleep but unable to rest well in the heat of the day, he rose and had breakfast at a nearby cafe before setting off for the address Carlotta had given him. It was a two-story adobe building like many others in Ciudad Juárez. The address she'd given him indicated the second floor, and as he climbed the steps he was reminded of his recent visit to Joe Collar's empty apartment. Here too there was no answer to his knock but when he tried the door it swung open easily.

Charlie Black sat in a chair facing the door. He'd removed his shirt, possibly because of the heat, and the flag tattoo was conspicuous across his chest. Ben noticed the blurred red of the stripes

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before he saw the wound, before he realized the man was dead.

"Damn it, Ben," Joe Collar said as he stepped out of the bedroom doorway and raised his gun. "I was hoping it wouldn't be you."

Ben's own shot caught Joe in the shoulder, and he spent the next several minutes wrapping a crude bandage around the wound. "That's two men you've killed, Joe. I would have been number three."

The little tattoo artist winced as Ben applied the bandage. "How did you know I killed Glendale?"

"I made a fool of myself getting the family to open the coffin and count the stars on the tattooed flag. There weren't forty-five as on the tattoo I watched you give Charlie. There were forty-four, like Howard Glendale would have had on his tattoo. Molly Humber was observant enough to confirm that the body was really Howard's. I was convinced there'd been a plot, though, and that meant Howard had been murdered instead of his substitute. I came here searching for Charlie Black, but a town like this gives you a lot of time to think. Howard had been in on the original plot, certainly, and had arranged for Black to be killed in his place during the stampede. A local prostitute confirmed this when she told me someone had tried to kill Black across the border."

"Everything got messed up," Joe Collar admitted, clenching his teeth against the pain. "I couldn't use a gun because a bullet wound would have ruined the stampede story. I swung at Black with an axe handle and missed. He figured what was up and took off running."

"Howard must have paid you for your part in it, but his brother Philip had to know too."

"Sure, Philip knew. All he cared about was saving the ranch, getting it for himself. When Black escaped I told him we needed a body and I could see we were both thinking the same thing. We didn't have to fake Howard's death. All we had to do was kill him."

"And Becca?"

"I left that to Philip. He said he could handle her."

Ben nodded. "The more I thought about it, the surer I was that you had to be in on the plot from the beginning. The size of the flag tattoo and its positioning had to be just right. How did they talk Charlie into getting it done?"

"Philip convinced him that Howard liked to see his cowhands

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displaying the flag on their chests and paid him to let me do it."

"So Howard died and you disappeared, along with the bill for Charlie's tattoo. That missing bill was the thing that incriminated you when I thought about it. Since Howard Glendale was really dead, and Charlie Black was alive, there was no reason for anyone to cover up the fact of Charlie's flag tattoo. It meant nothing under the circumstances. The only one it could harm was you, by possibly linking you to the plot. Only you would have gotten it out of your locked files, just as only you would have wanted Charlie dead. Someone had tried to kill him and he was only a danger to that person."

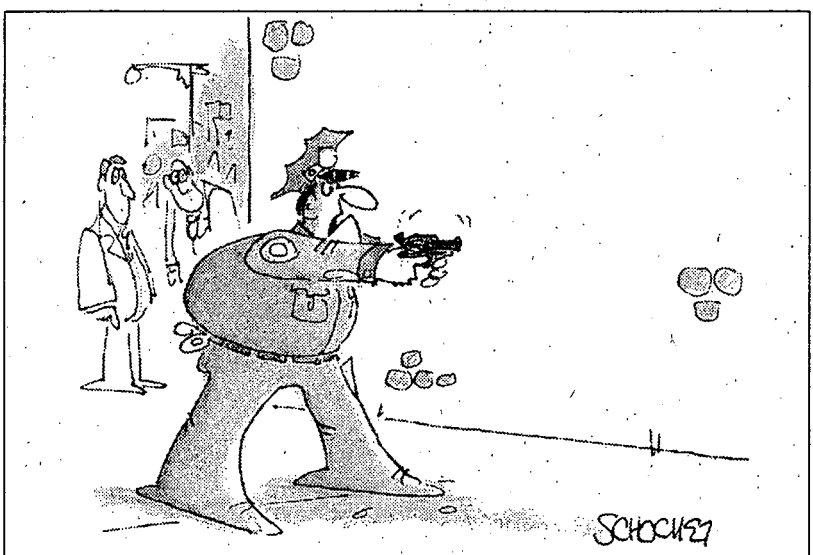
"I found him," Collar said. "This time I used a gun to be sure."

Ben Snow patted the bandage. "You're strong enough to ride. I'm taking you back to Sheriff Lawson. You can tell him about Philip's involvement and maybe get yourself a lighter sentence."

"What if I'd rather stay in Mexico?"

Ben shrugged. "Then I'll turn you over to the local police for killing Charlie. But I don't think you'd like Mexican prisons."

Joe Collar didn't think so either. Later that day he and Ben crossed the bridge to El Paso together. ●



"Okay, I've got you covered, now drop the camcorder!"

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Luminarias Make It Christmas-y

by Janet LaPierre

Lucy Magnusson considered her stingy little fire, decided the hell with it, and put on another log. She'd had a hard day. She had dragged and shoved the rabbit cages to a dry corner of the barn. She'd climbed up in the rain and wind to nail another piece of plastic sheeting to the barn roof. She and Nick had gotten thoroughly wet rounding up the hens. She deserved a good hot fire with her pot of tea and her book.

Her sheepdog-labrador crossbreed opened one eye as she moved past him, but didn't lift his head. Like her, Nick was no longer young and was not much given anyway to waste motion. He'd stay stretched out on the hearth until the heat of the fire had dried his rough black-and-white coat and eased his weary bones.

Fact was, Lucy admitted to herself, she too had slowed down some the past year, and winter's rain and cold had caught her short. The pile of split wood was not nearly big enough, and she should have reshingled the leaky spot on the barn roof. Poor planning, no question. She could hear in memory her father's maxim:

Janet LaPierre was born in Iowa and has lived most of her adult life in Berkeley, California, where she and her husband raised two daughters. A high school teacher before she turned to writing mysteries, Ms. LaPierre has elected to set her stories mostly on the foggy, austerely beautiful California north coast. Readers interested in her novel-length fiction should look for *Old Enemies*, a nominee for both the Anthony and Macavity awards for 1993.†

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"Girl, when the muscle's wore out, you gotta use your head."

Satisfied that the fresh log had finished snapping, she set the fire screen askew to aim the heat at her padded oak chair. She would have enjoyed some music, too; but she didn't feel like getting up and down to mess with the record player, and the radio had been playing nothing but syrupy Christmas music since about the first of December. Oscar Magnusson had lived and died stoutly agnostic, and in that, as in most other aspects of her life, Lucy hewed resolutely to her father's line.

One station had persisted in broadcasting Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* all week. As Lucy opened her worn copy of *Bleak House,* she reflected that the admirable Mr. Dickens had had his failings. She would not have given houseroom to any of the miserable Cratchit clan, especially that obnoxious Tiny Tim.

Teapot empty and fire a heap of glowing embers topped by a row of small flames, Lucy was lost in one of her favorite novels when a wholly unexpected sound, that of an engine, brought both her and Nick to heads-up attention and then to their feet.

Eighty-year-old Lucy Magnusson lived alone on some forty acres of scrub brush, worn-out pasture, and mixed apple and oak woodland—all that remained of her father's northern California sheep ranch. Her cottage and small barn sat back from the edge of a very high bluff above the Pacific Coast Highway. Neither was visible from the road below; and the driveway leading up was perilously steep and posted with a large No Trespassing sign.

Now another sound, even more unlikely. "Okay, boy. Come along," said Lucy, taking hold of her dog's collar and moving slowly toward the front door. The knock was repeated, and she called out, "Hold your damn horses. We're coming." She could not remember when there had last been a knock at that door. Not for years—five, ten. Longer.

Through glass panes steamy from the heat of the house, Lucy could make out only a single figure. "Well, shit," she muttered to Nick, whose neck hair was up stiffly under her hand. She took a deep breath, planted her feet, and yanked the door open. "You are trespassing on private property. Go away!" she said in a voice that sounded unnaturally loud. Lucy was not accustomed to talking to anyone but herself, and now and then Nick.

A woman stood on the porch, slicker hood pushed back and fair curly hair haloed with raindrops. As china-blue eyes widened and the pink-painted mouth gaped, Lucy had a sudden image of the

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picture she herself must present: flat bony body clad in men's wool trousers and loose flannel shirt, white hair escaping from its single long braid to hang in snaky locks around a lined and furious face.

The woman, just a girl really, recovered herself with a blink and then a grin. "Hi, Miss Magnusson? Lucy Magnusson? I'm Darlene Flaherty. Boy, it's really cold out here. Can I come in?" She slid past Lucy's belated grab and hurried across the room to the fireplace, where she held her palms out and sighed with pleasure. Nick sneezed and Lucy sniffed at unaccustomed odors — musky perfume, mint, something pungent like hair spray, a hint of gasoline.

"What do you want?" demanded Lucy, closing the door.

"To take you to a Christmas party," Darlene chirped.

Lucy stared, speechless at the very idea, and Darlene, apparently assuming she didn't hear well, spoke more loudly. "I'm a member of the BYPG — Baptist Young People's Group — at Faith Baptist, and we're having a Christmas for Seniors on Christmas day. Just four days away," she added.

"No," said Lucy.

"See, we'll bring old — senior — people to the fellowship hall at the church at noon. We'll have a tree and presents, and then a nice roast turkey dinner. And music — somebody will play the piano so we can all sing carols."

"Glogg?" asked Lucy, remembering one of the few things about Christmas that she'd liked. When Darlene's round face went blank, she said, impatiently, "Wine. Hot spiced wine."

"Oh my no!" said Darlene firmly. "We're Baptists. We don't touch alcohol."

"*I* don't touch religion," Lucy informed her.

"Huh?"

"I'm an agnostic. I don't believe in the divinity of Christ. Or of anybody," she added.

"Oh, you're just like Kevin," said Darlene with a giggle. "My boyfriend. But I'm working on him."

"Good. Now go home," said Lucy.

"Lucy, I can't do that." By now Darlene had warmed up and was looking relaxed and cheerful. "You're my assignment, see? For the Lord. And for Pastor Jellinck, too. Gee, this is a *nice* little house," she said wistfully.

"Come out of there!" said Lucy as Darlene sauntered around the

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corner into the kitchen alcove. "Stop that!" The girl giggled again and closed the refrigerator door, then lifted the lid of the freezer chest to peer inside.

"Just checking, to see what I should bring you. Lucy, I want to be your friend."

"I don't need friends." Lucy's voice was hoarse, and Nick, pressing against her thigh, whined. "You go home. Go away. How did you get up here, anyway?" she demanded suddenly. "There's a chain across the driveway."

"Oh, I'm sorry about that." Darlene ducked her head and reached into a pocket of her slicker. "Kevin should have slowed down in the rain, but he never does, and that rusty old chain was hard to see. What happened, he ran his motorcycle into it and got really mad, he loves that bike. So he, um — this thing, like a big staple? — Kev is really strong, and he yanked it right out of the post."

As Lucy reached out to take the rusted, twisted piece of iron, heavy footsteps sounded on the porch and the door was flung open to admit a tall, broad young man wearing a leather jacket and a mean look.

"You about ready to go?" he demanded of Darlene.

"Hi, honey. Lucy Magnusson, this is Kevin James. He grew up in Port Silva, like me, but he's been away."

Inspecting this second intruder and drawing on memories from her earlier, in-the-world life Lucy suspected that Kevin's "away" might have included a jail cell. She tightened her fingers in Nick's neck fur, and he yelped in surprise. Darlene, eying the big dog nervously, agreed that it was time to leave. "But we'll come back tomorrow."

"Don't," said Lucy as she closed and locked the door.

Lucy slept badly that night, troubled by the feeling that her world, the very air in her house, had been invaded, fouled. The next morning, with the rain still falling, she put on fisherman's boots and slicker and, metal-tipped hiking staff in hand, made her way down the nearly half-mile to the road. There she found the rusty iron chain trailing in the mud, the concrete posts leaning toward each other like a pair of drunks; the one on the right showed a jagged hole, exposing an interior that was crumbly to the touch. Clearly she'd need new posts.

The driveway, chiseled out of the rock and clay face of the hill-

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side, was rough as well as steep, and the climb back up was a hard one. Near the top, where the land curved east, the highway below disappeared under the bulk of the hill and only the white-capped ocean was visible. A guardrail marked the edge there, hammered together by Oscar many years ago: two six-foot lengths of two-by-eight board, painted white and nailed to wooden posts. Lucy stopped for a moment to rest and enjoy the rainswept, unpeopled view, leaning on the rail, which didn't feel any too stable. Everything was getting old and wearing out, especially her.

As she fed the rabbits and the hens, gathered the few eggs, and ate a hasty breakfast, Lucy tried to figure out how best to defend herself and vanquish the intruders. She could climb into her truck and make one of her rare trips out, to buy new driveway posts, maybe even a gate. But they might come back while she was away. She was standing at her kitchen window, drinking coffee and dithering, when the roar of the motorcycle assaulted her ears again.

She didn't answer the door, but after the knocking stopped she heard footsteps circling her house, then saw a figure come up on the back veranda and peer in a window. No choice but to go out and tell them once again to go away. Just briefly she lamented the telephone she'd had installed years ago, during Oscar's last illness, and then had removed after his death. But who would she have called? "Crazy old hermit Lucy Magnusson," as she was sure the people in town called her when they thought to call her anything, had not exchanged more than half-a-dozen words at a time with anyone for years. She could not think of a single person who would understand her sense of violation. She couldn't imagine being able to explain it.

"Hush," she said to Nick, who was barking himself hoarse. As the knocking began again, she went to the door and opened it just wide enough to reveal her face. "Go away, you vandals. Leave me alone."

Darlene put her weight against the door and pushed her way inside, reaching out to grasp Lucy's hands. "It's not vandals, it's just us. I told you we'd be back, and I brought you things."

Behind smiling little Darlene was big, scowling Kevin, carrying an aura of tobacco and sweat, gasoline and oil — the latter from his enormous black leather boots. Lucy had seen the prints of those boots in the dust of her barn floor this morning. Snoop!

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"What were you doing in my barn?" she demanded.

"Waiting for her, out of the rain," he said with a shrug and a nod at Darlene. "It's a nice old barn, well built. Get the roof fixed, you could live in it."

"I *live* in my house," snapped Lucy. "I keep animals in my barn —and work there."

He shook back his wet black hair and grinned. "You use that sledge and wedge? Little old thing like you?"

"You hush now, Kevin, and go find something to do." Darlene took two bags from his arms and closed the door behind him. "Here, Lucy, I brought you some . . ."

"You should call me Miss Magnusson!" said Lucy, backing away from the bags and whatever they contained. "I don't need anything."

"I was going to get you a tree, but I decided I'd just bring decorations for that little baby pine by your porch."

"No!" Lucy grabbed the proffered paper bag and tossed it aside. "I told you, no Christmas."

"Oh, Lucy, what a shame. I bet all the glass balls are broken." Darlene knelt to peer into the bag. "Look, here's one thing you might like, a red velvet rope with bells. I'll put it on your door."

And I'll take it down as soon as you leave, Lucy vowed silently.

"Then I brought some fresh fish," Darlene went on, moving toward the kitchen. "And a pound of fresh-ground coffee, and some cantaloupes and oranges. And some beer, that's for Kev but you can have some if you want."

"I don't need . . ."

"And bread and fresh pastries from Johansen's Bakery."

Lucy shut her mouth and put her hands behind her. With a big garden, the chickens and rabbits, and an occasional trip out to stock her freezer, she ate well enough, cooked as much as she had to. But she was a poor baker. Her mouth actually watered as Darlene set out fruit-filled pastries, bear claws, pecan-studded sticky buns.

Lucy wolfed down pastry and drank coffee and watched balefully as Darlene darted around the cottage like a curious terrier. The girl came back all bright-eyed and said, with a sigh, "This is just the cutest little house! Open-beam ceiling, fireplace in the living room, and the big bedroom too! If Kev and I had a house like this, we could get married. Ooh, look at the old pictures. Is this big guy with the white beard your father? He looks awesome!"

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"Yes." And up to six months before he died at age ninety-one, Oscar Magnusson would have dealt with these intruders the way a sheep rancher deals with marauding dogs. Lucy wiped her sticky fingers on her pants and lamented for the thousandth time the fate that had made her small and female.

A long time later Kevin came in, roiling the air with his size and energy and odors. And his evil intentions; Lucy could feel them. He sprawled in her chair before her fireplace drinking beer while Darlene chattered at him. "Yeah, yeah, it's a nice place," he said finally. "Two bedrooms and that loft over the fireplace, plenty big enough for three people. Don't you think?" he asked Lucy with a grin.

He stretched, then got slowly to his feet. "By the way, I split a bunch of wood. Nice house like this, you want to keep it warm. Come on, Darl. Time to hit the road."

"See you tomorrow," said Darlene. "I think I'll give your bathroom and kitchen a nice scrub. And you remember, now — only three more days to our party!"

Lucy considered, and then reluctantly put aside the lure of a "nice scrub," something she managed too seldom these days. "Never mind. Don't come back. I'm not going to any party." Lucy, and Nick, herded the pair out the door and locked it.

As the sound of the motorcycle faded, Lucy dropped to a chair and buried her face against Nick's shaggy shoulder. Those people meant to distort her life beyond recognition, and she didn't know how to stop them. All her guns, the two rifles and the shotgun, were big and heavy; she couldn't use them quickly, would have to set up some kind of ambush. And then the bodies: Any rancher knew the difficulty of disposing of large, dead, inedible animals.

"Maybe," she said to the dog, "they're just teasing. Maybe, if I go to the party, then they'll leave me alone."

Next morning Lucy hid in her loft and did not answer the door; but they came right in. They had a key, she found when she came angrily down the stairs. To her house.

"Found it in the barn," said Kevin, in what Lucy knew for a lie. "Now, if you fall down or something, need help, we'll be able to get in without breaking in. Truth is, an old lady like you would be a whole lot better off if there was somebody living here with you."

Lucy was speechless with rage and terror; but Darlene didn't notice or didn't care. "Here's what I thought, Lucy. If you don't

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want to decorate a tree, we can put out some *luminarias*. It's real Christmas-y, something people in Mexico always do. You put these votive candles in little brown paper bags with sand in the bottom and line them up along your sidewalk or driveway. They're supposed to light the way for the Christ child, I think."

Lucy didn't want to light the way for the Christ child or anyone else. "Paper and candles, in the rain. That's dumb."

"But see," said Darlene earnestly, "we have this modern kind. Brown *plastic* bags, with tiny little electric lights inside. We'll run a long extension cord from the barn and put them along the inside edge of the driveway, here near the top. It will be so pretty, so Christmas-y."

Kevin departed for the barn — to work, he said. As he passed her, he gave Lucy's long braid a supposedly playful tug that hurt.

"Now you come along with me, Lucy," said Darlene, "and help me put out the *luminarias*. Then I'll fix you and Kev some lunch."

Lucy sulked and fretted through the rest of the day, while Darlene scrubbed and admired and chattered and Kevin worked, it appeared, on the barn roof. Some good, anyway, thought Lucy to herself as she furiously considered and rejected plans. She had her truck, she could go and report these people for . . . what?

It was three o'clock before Kevin came in from the barn and announced that he was ready to go.

"Lucy, tomorrow is Christmas Eve!" said Darlene. "Aren't you glad we got the *luminarias* out? Tomorrow I'll bring you something pretty to wear to the party."

Lucy wanted to yield but couldn't make herself do it. Instead she shook her head and turned her back.

"Lucy," Darlene began in coaxing tones, but Kevin interrupted.

"Look, old lady, you ought to be grateful to Darlene and me. After all the work she's done, Darl's entitled to show you off at this party. If you don't go, people will think you really are just a crazy old lady who needs to be officially tended to, by the state or somebody. Instead of by your friends."

Nick had gone off to sulk on his own. Now Lucy went to the door and whistled him up — not for protection, because he wasn't a brave dog, but for familiarity. When he came out of the woods, head and tail low, she went to meet him, to dig her hands into his damp coat and pull him against her side as she turned silently to face the invaders.

"Tell you what," said Kevin with a palms-out shrug. "I'm about

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to get kicked out of the place I'm renting anyway. I'll come up here tonight and stay—in the barn. Keep you a lot safer than that useless mutt."

"Oh, Kev, that's a really good idea," said Darlene.

Kevin ignored her, his eyes on Lucy. "By the way, it looks like your old truck must have picked up a couple of nails. I'll fix the flats in time for the party; can't ride two dressed-up women around on the back of a Harley hog. Then I'll borrow the truck and bring my stuff up here."

"Good idea," repeated Darlene. "See you tomorrow, Lucy. Enjoy the *luminarias*."

As dark fell, the off-and-on rain became a steady downpour, and the wind picked up until it was howling like . . . like a terrified woman, Lucy thought. She waited for full dark before pulling on her boots and slicker; when Nick got to his feet and whined, she waved him back. "I have work to do, old boy. No sense you getting wet." She was outside for a long time.

It was nearly midnight when a wide-awake Lucy sat up even straighter in her fireplace chair, listening hard against the wind and then nodding as she heard the snarl of the big bike. Kevin, so far as she'd noticed, never modified his speed for rain or road surface or anything at all.

Nick caught the sound, too, and responded with a whine and a low growl, unusual from him. The two of them sat motionless, heads cocked, and heard the sound disappear, as if cut off. Just the rain now, and the howling wind.

"You stay here, good boy," said Lucy as she pulled on her rain gear again. She put the hood of her slicker up, grabbed her staff, and strode out into the night.

Still plugged in to the long extension cord, the *luminarias* glowed through their imitation paper bags, even the two that now dangled over the edge of the bluff. She pulled those two up gently, wiped smears of mud from their smooth plastic surfaces and decided they looked fine. Then, two at a time and very carefully, she moved the twelve little bags and their three-foot-long connecting lengths of wire away from the extreme outer edge of the driveway and put them back along the inner curve, where Darlene had originally lined them up.

Half done. She took a flashlight from the pocket of her slicker and after a moment located the pieces of the old white guardrail,

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which she had pried loose earlier and dragged off into the brush. She took these to the far edge of the driveway and threw them out as far as she could. One board, she had noticed yesterday, bore a streak of blue paint, evidence of having been scraped by Kevin's motorcycle. If they found the bike, they could check that.

Probably, though, they wouldn't find the bike. The way Kevin always gunned that machine, he'd most likely have followed the glowing path of the *luminarias* right over the edge of the hill at full throttle. Probably he'd missed the road entirely and sailed straight into the ocean.

But before that he had not only split a huge stack of wood; he'd done a good, tight job on the barn roof. And her house, her warm, private house, was now nice and clean. As she headed for that haven Lucy hoped, mildly, that Darlene had not been on the back of the motorcycle this trip.

From her porch she turned to look down the driveway, where the electric bulbs of the *luminarias* glimmered through the rain almost like actual candles. Regarding them with something approaching gratitude, she decided that they really were quite pretty — one more thing to like about Christmas. Maybe she'd keep them for next year. ●

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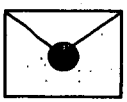

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DEPARTMENT OF FIRST STORIES

A NEW RELIGION

by K. A. Lata

I am spreading the word of the new God of a new religion. Sometimes people listen, but mostly they cast verbal stones. I spread the word over the telephone lines, though not by choice. Necessity dictates that I must work, and a bachelor's degree in psychology doesn't open the door to very many opportunities. So I have taken a crash course in the new theology of our times.

Each day at the beginning of the shift, we, the chosen, must stand before the mighty priests and priestesses of the banking entities that make up the new God. They remind us we are the chosen ones, we are the bearers of good tidings to the masses. We must spread the unspoken message: "You can have all the joys of heaven on earth, but only if you accept His credit card now."

The priests and priestesses of this new religion keep us psyched up and ready to sally forth each evening by telling us of the successes of some of the chosen at converting others to the new faith. Those of us not so successful are forgiven and told we must open the Book of

K. A. Lata lives with her family and three cats in Cranesville, Pennsylvania. She is currently a graduate student in Clinical Psychology at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, but for a short period after earning her B.A. in psychology she worked for a telemarketing company. The experience planted the seed for "A New Religion," her first published fiction.

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Rebuttals, bestowed upon us by the Almighty, and read from it, that all may rejoice in The Word. Yes, we need all the encouragement and reaffirmation of our beliefs we can get. Our work is difficult and tedious. We are the crusaders, and the pagans would love to feed us to the lions.

I have trouble believing in this cause. The stress I feel nightly, as I sit at my telephone station, is my just punishment for my unbelief. Night after night, Monday through Friday, I punch in numbers from the lists in front of me. My stomach twists into knots that somehow manage to twist tighter with each call I make. I am a heretic, and I must be made to suffer. I feel worthless because no one will listen as I try to spread the word.

I can understand how the pagans feel when I call them during their dinner, or while they are relaxing after work. They pick up their telephones only to listen to me preach that salvation is at hand if they will take this no-annual-fee, low-interest credit card from Him. I would be happy to let them go when at first they say no. But we never know when the priests and priestesses are monitoring the calls of the chosen, and to let the pagans go by taking no for an answer, by not trying to convince them of the True Faith, is a sin greater than any other we can commit. At times I fantasize that I can become part of the signal being carried through the phone lines, and can materialize at the other end to choke the unbelievers until they agree to convert. Like the crusaders who lived before me, my mission is to convert the pagans even if it means their deaths.

This night is the same as the others that have passed before it over the last three months, except that my need for absolution has grown stronger. I need to be more successful at spreading The Word. I need to remove the taint of the heretic that is burned into my flesh. After all, am I not a crusader? Am I not one of the chosen called upon to spread the message that more credit cards are the means to salvation? I move my marker to the next name on my call sheet and stab my fingers at the buttons on the telephone.

"Hello," says the voice without a face.

"Hello. Mr. John Savage?"

"No, this is his son."

"Is Mr. Savage home?"

"Yes, but he can't come to the phone right now. May I take a message?"

"Well . . . actually, I'm calling to tell Mr. Savage that he has been preapproved for a gold card."

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"Oh, I know he won't be interested. Let me ask though." After a moment the voice is back. "He says no."

"Actually, I really should speak with him. He's the only person I can take 'no' from. It's policy, sorry." *Was that a tiny click I just heard on my line?*

A pause. "Okay. Just a minute."

"Hello." A new voice, a man's voice, churlish and accusing.

The knots in my stomach coil tighter. I can hardly breathe through the tension in my throat. I smile into the telephone and, with an enthusiasm I do not feel, I begin to spread the good tidings.

"Good evening, Mr. Savage. My name is Joanne Archer and I'm calling to tell you that you have been preapproved for a gold card from . . ."

I hear his sharp inhalation and know he is clearly exasperated. He does not believe in the crusades and anything I say to him will only anger him further. He is a pagan and will remain so at all costs.

"Young lady," he begins, speaking slowly, "I do not want your card. I am tired of being bothered by people like you who think nothing of invading my privacy to lie and cheat. And you, young lady, are a liar. . . ."

The caustic edge to his words makes me feel an unwelcome doubt, that this crusade is not right. This is the doubt I have felt for months, that causes guilt to fester inside me, that makes me feel unworthy. I slam the receiver down to cut him off as tears sting my eyes.

Then I realize what I just did, the sin I have just committed. I look around the room. No one is coming toward me, or looking at me. No one knows my shame but me. I know I am not worthy of being a crusader. I know I will have to prove my worth, or face damnation. The pagan must die. In fact, he deserves to die. They all deserve to die. All those unbelievers with no faces, whose names and addresses lay before me printed out on labels.

I punch in the telephone number from the next label with my left hand while with my right I pull John Savage's label from the sheet. I carefully fold the sticky sides of the label together and slide it into the pocket of my jacket.

Tonight, when I return home, I will prove I am a good crusader, worthy of spreading the message of the new God. Since I can't reach them by phone, I'll reach them by mail. Packages do not need to be large to be deadly. It's time to burn the heretics at the stake. ●

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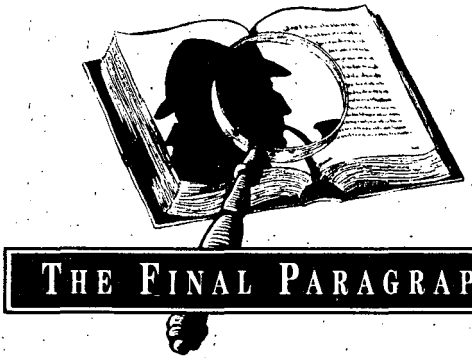

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

The Best Disguise

by Henry Slesar

Now that I have the time (ten to fifteen years) I have decided to write my autobiography. The title will almost certainly contain the word "forgetfulness," since it's always been a problem for me.

Unfortunately, I don't have a face that's easy to forget. My thick-lashed eyes and killer smile had enchanted scores of women and one television producer, a man called Teddy Levinson, "Theodore" on his tombstone. Not that I ever saw it. By the time it was unveiled, I was busy trying to avoid being arrested for his murder.

Teddy was at the helm of a soap opera called *Before the Dawn*. Until I auditioned for him my only acting experience had been in showcase productions. My face was just right, and I was hired to play a con man who might (or might not) be reformed by the heroine, depending on the producer's considerable whim.

I was happy. My live-in girlfriend Tina was happy. She had been ready to leave me, tired of my failed promises. An actress herself, Tina hoped my success might lead to her own.

I had few lines at the outset. My character was a taciturn type. But suddenly I was confronted by twenty, thirty pages of dialogue, demanding a feat of memory beyond my capability.

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The TelePrompTer only crippled my already lame performance. Then my character began receiving death threats from a former accomplice, and I realized I was soon to be Written Off.

I tried to discuss the matter with Teddy, but he managed to avoid me. I decided to confront him in his bachelor apartment. I employed a simple ruse. I appeared at the concierge's desk carrying a florist's box, a prop from the show. Teddy opened the door without hesitation, Tina, in a state called "deshabille," was behind him.

I'm not exactly sure of the order of the events that followed. I know I struck Teddy with the flower box, a blow of no consequence. Then he lunged at me, and there was a scuffle. Somehow, I got my hands on an art deco sculpture made of heavy chrome. Then I was out on the street.

When my wits were reassembled, I made a hurried visit to my bank and withdrew every penny before Teddy's murder became a media event.

It wasn't Teddy's picture that appeared most often on the tube. It was mine. There were plenty available, clips from the serial. Teddy would have liked the publicity. The most important word in his vocabulary had been "Nielsen."

My most significant word was "disguise."

It was a bitter irony that the face I wanted the world to see now had to be concealed. Millions could identify me. Beards and moustaches were useless, since my con-man character employed both in his capers.

Then it came to me. There was one disguise that would be foolproof—that would keep me safe until the media, the police, and the public became forgetful. That word again!

I visited thrift shops in the meanest neighborhoods, rifling the used clothing racks, guessing at sizes, murmuring something about "my wife" with every purchase. I returned to my seedy hotel room and spent days seeking the proper combination, the right makeup.

That was how I became "Mrs. Pemberton." Until three nights later, sitting in the hotel bar, nursing a whisky, when the police officer entered. I didn't connect him to the low-voiced phone call made by the bartender until the beefy hand dropped on my shoulder and I was invited to the local precinct. And when I met Lt. Gallagher, I could only stammer out one question. How did you know? How could you tell?

How did the actor's disguise fail him? Turn to page 113 for "The Final Paragraph."

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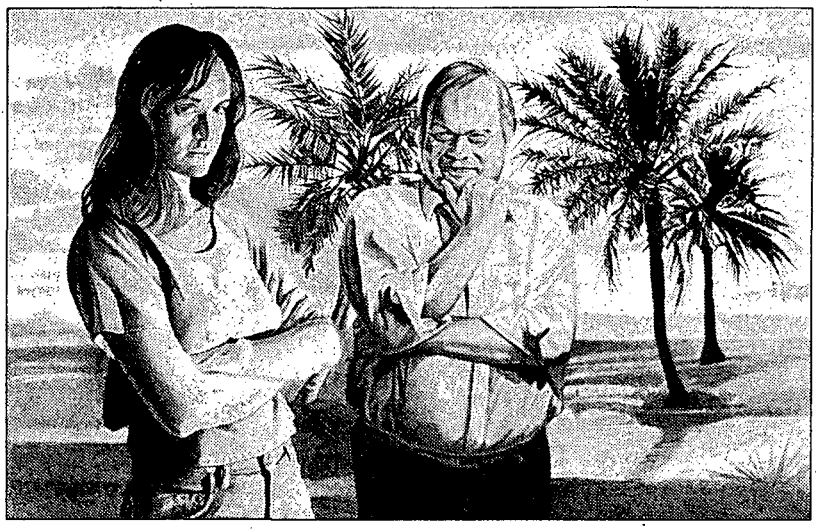

Art by Steve Cavallo

LAST THE BEST

by William Beechcroft

When Alban "Sicko" Van Ness was released on a technicality, Detective Kat Curtci fought her almost overpowering compulsion to scream at the judge: *You fat-faced, dull-brained idiot! The man's a menace.*

That might be emotionally satisfying, but Kat knew such an outburst would be career suicide. And the legal lapse had been her own doing. So she silently cursed herself for being an over-eager cop. Van Ness's running a stop sign had brought the man to Kat's attention. She was standing beside the computer when NCIC's data on Van Ness rolled out of the printer. Some rap sheet! It even included his nickname, "Sicko." He had last been detained on suspicion of B&E in Indianapolis, got out of that one on a technicality also. Currently he wasn't wanted anywhere. Here he was vacationing—or maybe something less innocent—on her beat, southwest Florida's laid-back Malabar Island.

©1996 by William Beechcroft

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Female characters have been cast as sleuths in crime and detective stories since the 1860s, but the vast majority of such characters were either of the amateur variety or ladylike private detectives. It was only in the 1970s that policewomen detectives really began to come into their own. In Florida police detective Kat Curtci, William Beechcroft has created an admirable addition to their tribe.

Boy Wonder Brice, the arresting officer at the stop-sign bust, had been distraught over a lack of outstanding warrants on Van Ness. He was hot to nail the guy for something more career enhancing than running a damned stop sign, but in the squad room, Chief McCready put the quietus on Brice's eagerness.

"You're assigned to traffic, Brice. Detective work we leave to the detectives." Whereupon the chief gave Kat a copy of Brice's arrest report. Brice bristled at that, and McCready swung back to him. "I'm well aware of your beef: She's new and you're yearning. But she came here with FBI crime-scene training. Life is unfair. Now get back out there, Brice, and do something constructive about the winter-season traffic."

"Friend Brice is leaving in a high dudgeon," Detective Duckworth murmured to Kat.

"Drives better than his customary blue funk," she riposted with a straight face.

Van Ness's local address was an isolated rental beach house on Lonely Bayou at the north end of the island. Kat made it a point to drive out there frequently, but all was serene until the night of January 18. A cinder block through Island Jewelry's display window was the smash part of the smash-and-grab that relieved the shop of $10,000 in gold baubles.

The case was Kat's and she knew who had done it. Instinct, not evidence. She subsequently saw the evidence through the window of Van Ness's rented house: a black felt Island Jewelry bag carelessly left under a table in the living room. She knocked. No answer.

Then she made the mistake that had just set Van Ness loose. She busted into the place — and no one was there. If she'd had a

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search warrant . . . But she hadn't, and now, in the county courtroom, Van Ness walked past her, a free Sicko, his chilly blue eyes riveting on her as he strode by. His bloodless lips moved. *Watch your ass.* An icicle slid up her spine.

"It's nothing to worry about," Kat's sometime partner Ellis "Moby Duck" Duckworth told her as they inched through the heavy seasonal traffic on Melaleuca Way, Malabar's main drag.

"Then why are we riding together, Mobe? You supposed to keep an eye on me?"

Duckworth, his impressive gut just short of impeding the steering wheel, chuckled. "Call it reorientation, Bela." He'd hung her with that handle when he'd heard her father was a Romanian exile from the Transylvanian Alps region. "Bela LuCurtci!" Duckworth had bellowed across the squad room, to which she had shot back—gazing at his prodigious gut—" 'Thar she blows!' " And Moby Duck he instantly became. Nobody else wanted to fence verbally with Detective Katherine Curtci after that. She jabbed with javelin tongue.

"Hey," he said into the air-conditioned silence. "Don't take this as a reprimand. You just got a little ahead of yourself, that's all."

"I should have known better that to bust in without a warrant."

"Yeah, you shoulda."

"By the time I got one, he would have gotten rid of the evidence."

"Yeah, he woulda."

"And he could have just sat there and laughed at me."

"Yeah, he coulda."

"*Stop* that, Moby! I'm trying to make some serious points here. If I—WATCH IT!"

Ahead, an Ohio Chevy had stopped dead. Moby rammed down the brake pedal, stood their unmarked Ford on its nose, and squealed to a halt ten inches short of disaster.

"Jeez! I'm going to have seat-belt burns in five-mile-an-hour traffic."

"Eyes on the road, Detective," she said. "Listen, how long do we play partner?"

"Want it straight?"

"No other way."

"Until I'm convinced you're not going to go flying off on your own and do something else stupid."

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Kat turned to gaze at Moby's doughy face with its three chins. Her dark eyes narrowed. "What's it going to take?"

"Your word."

"You kidding?"

"I know it's a mission impossible. But that's what McCready wants. I think he sees me as your father image."

"I've got my own father, thank you. And I'm a big girl."

"Yeah, I've noticed that. Five-ten?"

"Five-eleven, stocking feet." She tossed back her mane of coal-black hair and gave him an exaggerated shrug. "So, okay, Dad, I'll be a good girl."

"And not bust into any more houses with nobody at home."

"And not bust into any more houses like that."

"And maybe even get in touch with me if you're in doubt."

"About what?"

"About anything, Bela."

His tone surprised her. The big lunk sounded as if he really cared.

"Okay."

"Okay, what?" he pressed.

"Okay, I'll get in touch when I have a problem bigger than I can cope with."

He turned to grin at her.

"Mobe, watch the damned road!"

He kept grinning. "You're a real case, Bela."

"How so?"

"You don't think you ever will have a problem you can't handle, do you?"

"Not if I stop raiding empty houses." He was right, though. She knew damned well she could handle anything that came her way.

That was before she got the valentine.

It was in her mailbox two days later, the traditional red heart-shaped box, an inch deep, sealed with Scotch tape. Her name was handwritten on a piece of paper taped to the top of the box. She walked slowly from the mailbox up her sand-and-shell drive, flipping through unwanted catalogues and a couple of bills. She studied the box again. No stamps. Someone had personally slipped it in her mailbox. She grinned. Moby, you're a surprisingly sentimental old tub of lard.

In the kitchen, she slit the cellophane tape with a paring knife,

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set the box on the counter, and slipped off the cover. Chocolate-covered cherries, she hoped. She had a thing for choc—

"My God!" She jumped back in horror. Coiled inside the box was a snake, surely a yard long, and very dead. The scales were shiny blue-black, terminating in raw scarlet where the head had been chopped off.

The chill that had shot through her turned hot. She pulled out one of the dinette chairs and sat down hard. Her fingers trembled and a fine sheen of perspiration broke across her forehead.

"Oh, *damn* it!" she moaned. Then, as a cop, she forced herself to look back at the box and its incredible, grisly contents.

Fingerprints? Could be, if she hadn't smeared them all with hers. Anybody notice the delivery of this . . . this thing? She lived pretty well isolated here at the end of Strangler Fig Lane. Only two other houses in the quarter-mile stretch from Melaleuca Way. She would ask, of course.

But first, and she hated herself for the way her mind jumped right to it, she was going to call Moby.

She grabbed the phone, pressed 47 — Then she set the phone back on its cradle. This was the act of a panicky woman, not a cop. So she'd gotten a snake valentine from a sick-in-the-head non-admirer. Morning was soon enough to mention it to Duckworth. There wasn't anything wrong in taking precautions, though.

She took her bath with her ugly standard-issue 9mm Glock 17 on the floor beside the tub. She tried to let the sudsy sandalwood warmth dissolve her disgust at what now lurked in her refrigerator, and she wondered if she'd really been smart to move out of the rented condo into this cheaper but far more isolated bayside house.

When the fat detective arrived to pick her up at 8 A.M., he got in the first word.

"I think this procedure might be kinda dumb, Bela. Ride with you on day shift then leave you alone out here all night. Know what I'm saying?"

She held the door open for him. "Come on in. I've got something to show you."

She took the heart-shaped box out of the refrigerator by its edges. No sense putting more prints on it than she had to. "This little gift arrived in my curbside mailbox by unseen messenger yesterday. Might be prints on it, but take a look."

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Carefully fingering only the box sides, he jiggled the top off. "JEEZ!" Duckworth recoiled two steps backward. "Who in the hell —Oh, Van Ness, of course."

"It would seem so. He didn't wait long to get started, did he? Well, his prints surely are in the Indianapolis AFIS, so if he was as careless with this repulsive little token as he is obvious, we should be able to nail him fast as a fax."

Duckworth yanked off his sweat-stained golf hat and mopped his forehead with a blue bandanna. "Jeez, I hate snakes. What kind of moron—"

"It's not so much the snake," she broke in as she slid her Glock into her handbag. "Why did he lop off its head?"

When they were side by side in Duckworth's unmarked unit, he reached for the key, then paused. "Maybe he found it that way. "Y'know, saw it dead on the road somewhere and that gave him the idea. Could be that's all there is to it."

"That's one way of looking at it," she agreed. But she didn't think so.

"Anybody on this road see the delivery?"

"I checked them by phone before you got here. Negative from one. The other recalled only a police unit on patrol."

He turned the key, and they rolled into the day's first assignment, routine investigation of a break-in at the Scoop Du Jour ice-cream store in the Malabar Pines Shopping Center.

On their way south, they passed Brice's unit heading north on his traffic patrol. He scowled as they rolled by.

"Now there's a guy too eager and much too arrogant for his own good," Moby said. "Instead of having his nose to the grindstone, he always seems to have his finger in the air."

Around one, they stopped at the NationsBank branch so she could use the ATM.

"Hey!" He'd rolled down the driver's window to call after her, "Catch you here in ten minutes. A burger okay? Then we'll hit that stolen-boat complaint out on the south end."

She nodded, not thrilled by the prospect of a fat-laden offering from the Garden of Eatin', but she would offset it tonight with a green salad and nothing more. A few extra pounds might not show on her lank frame, but she could always feel them.

Kat walked up the bank's entrance steps. The ATM was to the right of the doors. She stood back and waited in the unshaded Florida heat while an outsider in white ducks and a green sports

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shirt alternately muttered and kicked at the machine's base.

"Hate the goddam thing," he grumped as he walked past without looking at Kat.

She stepped up and accomplished her seventy-dollar grocery money withdrawal without trouble. Even under the bank's portico, she could feel the sun's power.

Then she felt something else. A quick little chill, but not one of temperature. She swung around. Just the row of empty cars in the bank's parking lot. Nothing but nonthreatening tourist traffic out on Melaleuca Way. Even one of Malabar's own green-and-whites waited at the corner stop sign for a break in the through traffic.

Then Duckworth pulled into the lot and stopped at the bottom of the steps.

"You set?" he called.

"Yep." She slid into the A/C coolness. Real coolness, not the freakish little ripple she'd had up by the ATM. A cold flash? Come on, Kat.

She fastened her seat belt, and Duckworth nosed into the eastbound snail's pace.

The picture arrived in the next day's mail. There she stood, her back to the camera but her head half turned from the ATM so that it was obviously she. Nice fast work, Postal Service. Would that all first-class mail came as promptly. But it really hadn't been much of a trick. Drop it at the Malabar P.O. before five, and local delivery would handle it the next day.

Even photo processing could be had in an hour at two island locations. Take a pic and have it hot from the processing machine sixty minutes later, guaranteed.

Of course, Van Ness was too clever even for that. He knew she certainly would check with every hour-photo processing setup within plausible driving distance.

Not a chance of that, Kat realized as she stared at the tiny but heart-chilling feature that made this picture a real stand-out. The guy had used a Polaroid. An untraceable print developed right in his camera. Smart, Van Ness. And you really know how to pull my string. Across her neck in the photo, he had drawn a fine line with red ink.

"A decapitated snake. A photo with a cut throat. Oh, I'm just having a ball, Moby," she said, her phone slippery with palm sweat.

"I'm gonna pick up that som' bitch right now!" Duckworth barked.

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"That sounds fine, but we both know you can't. No proof. The valentine box turned out to be clean except for my prints and yours. You know there won't be any prints on the Polaroid. We've got nothing solid on him. And what if we had? What's the penalty in Florida for sending a snake and a photo to a cop? He's laughing while I'm sweating."

Duckworth was silent. Then he said, much more calmly, "You want I should come over?"

She almost blurted, *Yes, yes, for God's sake!* Not like herself at all, that panicky impulse. Damn it, she was an experienced detective, a big girl—two inches taller than Moby Duck, come to think of it.

"No," she said. "He's getting his kicks from taunting me. It's becoming something of a pattern."

She pulled a knife from the kitchen drawer. Be an interesting moment for Van Ness to show up, wouldn't it, with her standing here armed with a ten-inch pig sticker. She grunted with a trace of humor at the thought and began chopping carrots for her atonement salad.

The phone rang at nine, just as she was about to switch on *Unsolved Mysteries.* Moby again.

But it wasn't.

"Detective Curtci." A harsh whisper, and so close, as if he had the phone almost in his mouth.

She said nothing. Hang up, she would have told any victim of a call like this. But she didn't.

"Did you enjoy your valentine, Detective? And your portrait?"

Well, that neatly connected him with those incidents. She was surprised at how well a whisper disguised a voice. But would she have recognized Van Ness's natural voice? She'd heard him mutter only a few words to the judge. Wasn't there *some* way to wrap him up for delivery back to the court, this time with the hard evidence of threatening the life of a police officer? Which, she realized, he actually hadn't yet done.

"Cat got your tongue, Katherine?"

"Listen to me, Van Ness!" she bristled. "So far all you've done is threaten. Leave it at that. And get your ugly butt out of this part of the country. Because I swear—"

"Oh my, such a temper!" the hideous in-her-ear whisper taunted with a sibilant little chuckle. *"Ever hear this one, Katherine? 'First the worst, second the same. Last the best of all the game.'"*

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The line went dead.

She stared at the handset. First the worst, second the same . . . It was a kid's rhyme. First had come the headless snake. Second was the throat-slit Polaroid.

Last the best of all the game.

My God, what would that be!

With shaking fingers, she tapped in Duckworth's number, hating herself for it.

He wasn't there. Oh God. She had a wild impulse to call the police, but she was the police. A 911 call would unleash seven kinds of confusion, and just because she'd had a whispered call that technically hadn't been threatening at all.

Enjoy your valentine?

Cat got your tongue?

Such a temper!

First the worst, second the same . . .

That would look just great in the responding officer's report. There wasn't any love lost in the ranks for her ascendency to detective status, but they'd just love this.

It came down to securing the house as best she could and sleeping with her gun. Locks and a Glock. Why hadn't she done something about the sliding glass doors to the lanai off the kitchen? The right tools, and you could probably lift them right out of their tracks. Why hadn't she done something about that? If he did work on the glass doors, at least there'd be noise. She hoped. And believe me, she told herself, I'm an instant light sleeper.

Not in her bed. She hoped extra blankets properly plumped would look enough like her sleeping. In black slacks and a dark blouse, she opted for the wicker chaise in a secluded corner of the living room. The Glock, with seventeen in the clip and one in the chamber, lay in her lap.

The silence itself was scary. As her eyes adapted to the darkness, wan starlight made hazy rectangles of the two windows across the room. The tiniest of moves made the wicker creak beneath her. She waited.

Then she thought, this is useless. The chances of Van Ness's showing up are . . . what? One in a hundred? Better than that. Much better. Was it the blood of ancestral Romany gypsies that made her so certain he would show? *Last the best of all the game.* He was coming.

From the kitchen, a loud creak made her heart race. Settlement

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groan? Her fingers trembled on the pistol's chunky plastic grip.

This had to be incredibly stupid, sitting here waiting for a looney to break and enter. She should have taken up Moby's offer to babysit. God, it was hot in here. She had killed the A/C's rattle. But suddenly it went on. No, no, that was the refrigerator, its hum exaggerated by her oversensitized hearing.

She caught herself drowsing and shook her head to clear the gathering cobwebs. Checked the luminous dial of her watch. Twelve-twenty. *Twelve-twenty!* She must have slept for nearly fifteen minutes. That would never do.

Was she overreacting to nothing more worrisome than a joker who got his kicks from threatening then leaving his victim enmeshed in self-regenerating fear? Maybe Van Ness was already halfway to Orlando, chortling at how cleverly he had—

What was that? Another house noise . . . No, it was the kind of metallic grating that would be made by somebody prying up a sliding glass panel of the lanai entrance. She'd asked for this, hadn't she? She'd known how easily those panels could be lifted out, and she'd done nothing about it.

She *wanted* Van Ness in here. Wanted him here so she could blast him out of her life. Aren't you the cold-blooded bitch, she marveled at herself. But her mouth went dry at the realization.

Now the house was alive with stealthy rustles. Imagination or nutso Van Ness creeping in? She sat statue-still, the gun held in front of her in both trembling hands.

A shadow drifted soundlessly across the dim window rectangles. Not even the merest of bumps against a chair or the coffee table. He must have checked out the house through the windows while she was on duty. Ice water broke across her shoulders. Incredible how silently he moved. Toward the bedroom. Into the bedroom. She heard a ripping sound, a burst of breath expelled.

Now she sensed rather than saw that he was in the bedroom doorway trying to pierce the darkness, trying to find her.

His voice was low and raspy. "Cute trick. But it won't help."

A new jolt of fear heightened her senses. She could see his dim form against the less dense grayness of the bedroom behind him.

He moved forward. "I see you now! See your watch."

The damned luminous dial! *"Stop right there, Van Ness! Hands behind your neck."* Her voice sounded a lot steadier than she felt. "Another step and you're a dead man."

"Ah, Bela, you don't have the guts." And he lunged for her.

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With a two-handed grip, she aimed where his chest should be—*Bela?*

Barely in time, she jerked the gun downward and fired three quick shots.

The charging figure crashed to the floor. There was a moment of absolutely dead silence. Then she heard someone banging into the kitchen through the lanai entrance, someone with heavy feet. A blinding shaft of white light shot across the room, darted about then centered on the fallen man—a husky man, all in black, wearing a black ski mask, groaning in pain with his hands clasped around his ruined knee. A boning knife glittered on the carpet near his right hand.

"You okay, Bela?" said the voice behind the flashlight. Duckworth. That sloppy, fat, wonderful man.

"You're a tad late, Moby," Kat managed.

"I got to thinking about you isolated out here with this guy on the prowl. Drove out, didn't see any car but yours, started to check out the house, saw the lanai doors had been forced. Heard the shots and damn near busted my butt charging into your kitchen."

He played the flash over the crumpled man on the floor. "Looks like you took pretty good care of Van Ness all by yourself."

"It's not Van Ness," she said.

"Say what?"

"He called me Bela. Nobody outside the department would know that. He's one of our own."

"Which is why you knee-capped him instead of following regs and shooting for the chest?"

"Something like that."

"Well, let's see who this som' bitch is." He bent down and jerked off the ski mask. "Shoulda guessed," he said into the pain-contorted face of Boy Wonder Brice. "You really did resent Bela here leapfrogging over you. Looks like the department was right in holding you back, you miserable excuse for a cop."

"Ambulance," Brice muttered. "I need an ambulance."

"I'll call it in," Kat offered. She stood on rubbery legs and hit the room's light switch. In the glare of the ceiling floods, Brice's right leg was twisted in a way legs don't normally twist. Blood pooled beneath the shattered knee.

After everyone else had cleared out in the wake of the ambulance's howling departure, she managed to put coffee together. She and Moby sat in her kitchen wide awake at two-thirty A.M.

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"Found Brice's car one street over." Moby's thick fingers turned his coffee mug around and around. "Must have walked here along the shoreline." He shook his head slowly. "I feel like a real idiot assuming it was Van Ness."

"That makes two of us. It's pretty obvious now. Brice figured he could get me out of the way and Van Ness would be blamed. I wouldn't be surprised if Brice's next move was to track down Van Ness and rig a 'suicide.' That would have tied it all up in one neat package."

Duckworth nodded. "If you hadn't been so fancy with that pistola, lady, you could have been one dead cop."

She nodded. "I coulda."

"Lemme ask you something. If you hadn't tumbled to the Bela thing, would you have shot to kill?"

"I woulda."

"You should have asked for more help early on, kid."

"I shoulda."

He set down his cup and cocked his head. "Bela, are you putting me on?"

"Would I ever do that, Moby?" She felt a wild impulse to leap up, grab him, and dance around the kitchen. But she settled for another cup of coffee. ●

THE FINAL PARAGRAPH

Continued from page 101

"No, the bartender didn't know who you were," Lt. Gallagher said. "He just thought you looked suspicious. You see, 'Mrs. Pemberton,' you forgot to shave this morning."

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A Good Thing

by Simon Brett

Generally speaking, it has to be said I'm quite good with money. I mean, I think about it, I don't just rush out and do daft things; I'm careful about whose advice I listen to. I can always spot a good thing.

Obviously, having been born to it helps. I mean, I have got this kind of genetic aptitude. You know, some ancestor of mine back in the seventeenth century or whenever caught on to the idea that there was money to be made in this new slave-trade business, and he went for it. Then subsequent generations chose their moment to go into coffee, or rubber, or railways, or armaments, or whatever it happened to be and, generally speaking, they got it right. Money breeds money, as the saying goes, though my view is more that breeding breeds money.

Simon Brett is the author of three widely praised psychological suspense novels, one of which, *A Shock to the System*, was made into a movie starring Michael Caine. His most recent suspense novel, *Singled Out*, was published by Scribners in 1995. In a more traditional vein, Mr. Brett continues to produce new books in his two long-running mystery series: the Charles Paris theater novels and the comic mysteries in which the elderly Mrs. Pargeter appears. See *A Reconstructed Corpse* (Scribners, 1994). †

And it has to be said, we Foulkeses have got the breeding. Obviously we didn't have it when we started, but then who did? Mind you, once one of my distant ancestors had saved up enough to buy a peerage from James I of England—and VI of Scotland, don't let us forget—well, we were up and away.

And haven't really looked back since. Entrepreneurial we've

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always been — that's the word — entrepreneurial. We haven't just let our money sit and vegetate — good heavens, no — we've been out there watching it work for us. I mean, I've got a lot of chums who caught nasty colds over the Lloyds insurance debacle, and though I feel sorry as hell for the poor buggers — and particularly for their wives — I have to say they had it coming to them.

I'd never get involved in something like that — just salting the money away and sitting quietly at home, waiting for the divvies to come in. No, I invest in things I can see. And let me tell you, I'm pretty damned sharp about recognising the kind of guy who's going to point me in the direction of the right sort of investments. I'm an extremely good judge of character. I know a good thing when I see it.

Which is why I was so delighted when I first met Roland Puissant.

It was in my club, actually. Blake's. The Foulkeses have been members there virtually since the place started, back in the — what? — 1830s, some time round then. Roland himself isn't a member — came as the guest of a friend. He told me frankly when we met at the bar that Blake's wasn't really his scene. Didn't like the idea of being anywhere where he had to wear a suit and tie. Wasn't that he hadn't *got* suits and ties — he was wearing a very nice pinstriped number and the old Harrovian colours that day, actually — but he didn't like being *forced* to conform by club regulations. Said he thought it was an infringement of the rights of the individual.

And I respected him for that. Respected him for coming out with his opinion right there, at the bar in Blake's, surrounded by all those crusty old members. As I discovered later, there's never any pretence about Roland. If he thinks something, he says it. Would rather run the risk of offending someone than compromising his opinions and values.

Good thing, so far as I'm concerned. There are so many bullshitters around these days, who'll contort themselves into knots agreeing with everything you say to them, that a direct approach like Roland's is very refreshing.

Anyway, we got talking at the bar. His friend had nipped off to make a phone call — though Roland secretly suspected that the phone call would quickly lead to a nearby hotel where the friend had set up an assignation with a rather dishy little thing from a public relations company. Roland had a nasty feeling that he was

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being used simply as an alibi for the chap's wife.

Well, the bloke I was meant to be meeting hadn't shown, either. Can't say I was too disappointed. Some fellow I'd apparently known from Eton, though the name didn't ring a bell. Phoned up saying he'd been out of the country for some years and was dead keen to meet up with old chums like Nicky Foulkes. This already made me a bit leery; so many times that sort of introduction leads to someone trying to sell you insurance. Even been known for people in that world to lie about having been at school with you. Buy a tie and invent some rigmarole about having been three years below you in a different house and always looking up to you, soften you up a bit, then wham, in with the "I don't know if you'd ever stopped to consider what your family would stand to receive if —and heaven forbid—but *if* something were to happen to you . . ."

So, basically, I was standing at the bar wondering why the hell I'd agreed to meet this bloke, and getting chirpier with every passing minute that he didn't show up. I was beginning to feel confident that the danger had passed, reconciling myself quite cheerfully to an evening's drinking, assuming I could find someone congenial to drink with . . . when—lo and behold—Roland Puissant turned up.

Answer to a maiden's prayer, eh? The other members I was surrounded with in the bar were of the crotchety nothing's-been-the-same-since-we-lost-the-Empire persuasion, so it was a relief simply to see someone round my own age, apart from anything else.

And, once we got talking, it pretty soon became clear that Roland hadn't just got age going for him. Oh no, he was very definitely an all-round good bloke.

Could put back the sauce too. I'm no mean performer in the tincture stakes, but he was more than matching me glass for glass. We were on the malt. Lagavulin from Islay's my favourite. Turned out Roland loved the stuff too. Clearly a man of taste.

Well, after an hour or so on the blessed nectar, I suggested eating something by way of blotting paper. And since the food at Blake's is indistinguishable from blotting paper, I said we should eat in the club dining room. Roland said fine, so long as it was his treat—he insisted on that. I said, your treat next time, old lad. Nonmembers aren't allowed to pay at Blake's.

At first he wasn't keen on being in my debt, but he came round graciously enough. So we got stuck into the club claret. Long expe-

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rience has taught me that the only way to deal with Blake's food is to anaesthetise the old tastebuds with alcohol. Always works for me — I can never remember what I've ordered and don't notice what it is while I'm eating the stuff. Perfect.

We were into the second bottle before we got talking about money. Roland just let something slip by mistake. He tried to cover it up, but I'm pretty Lagavulin- and claret-resistant, so I leapt on it straight away.

All he actually said was ". . . and you know that wonderful feeling of confidence when you're onto an absolute copper-bottomed cert of a good thing."

He could have been talking in purely general terms, but the way he hastily moved the conversation on told me he was dealing with specifics. I'm pretty sharp about that kind of stuff. Something of an amateur psychologist, actually. Well, you need to be in the kind of circles I move in. Stuffed full of shysters trying to put one over on you — particularly if you happen to have a bit of the old inherited.

So I pounced. "'Good thing,' Roland?" I said. "And what particular 'good thing' are you talking about at the moment?"

"Oh, nothing."

But I stuck at it. "Horse?"

"No, not a horse in this instance."

I was rather pleased with myself: My line of questioning had made him admit that he was talking about something specific rather than general.

"Investment opportunity?" I pressed on.

He was embarrassed that I'd seen through him so quickly, but nodded.

"Tell me more," I said. "Always like to hear the details of any investment opportunity. We Foulkeses have traditionally had a nose for this kind of thing."

Still Roland prevaricated. "Oh, I don't think it'd interest you."

"Let me be the judge of that. Go on, tell me — unless of course you've got the whole thing sewn up yourself and don't want to let anyone else in on it."

"No, for heaven's sake," he protested. "I wouldn't do that. It's just I do hate giving tips to friends. It's like selling them a car — hellish embarrassing if the thing breaks down."

"Listen," I said. "I'm a grownup. I'm quite capable of making my own decisions. I don't get taken in by anything iffy. Don't forget,

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my surname's Foulkes, and we Foulkeses have had quite a reputation over the years for making some pretty damned good business decisions. Come on, Roland, you bloody well tell me what this is all about!"

That little barrage broke down his resistance. He sighed, shrugged, and told me what it was all about.

Basically, like most financial projects, it was buying and selling. Buying cheap and selling expensive — the principle on which the British Empire was built. And the principle by which the Foulkeses had done so well out of the British Empire.

Like the slave trade on which the family fortune had been built, Roland's investment scheme was not illegal. Some people might perhaps go a bit wobbly about its ethics, but it was undoubtedly within the law. Sounded just the sort of "good thing" a member of the Foulkes family should get involved in.

In fact the project's parallels with the slave trade didn't stop at its legality. The commodities being bought and sold were domestic servants. Men and women from the Caribbean were offered a complete service—flight to London, job found, work permit sorted out. The investment required was to pay for these services. The profit came from the fee the clients paid to the agency which handled their cases.

When Roland mentioned this, I shrewdly asked whether the word "fee" was appropriate. Wasn't "bribe" nearer the mark? He just gave me a charming grin and said we didn't want to get bogged down in semantics.

But wasn't it hellish difficult to arrange work permits for foreigners? was my next question. Roland agreed it was. "This is the beauty of the scheme, though," he went on. "My contact has an 'in' with the Home Office."

It was the first time he'd mentioned a "contact." Felicia Rushworth, she was called. She had had the idea for the business and needed capital. Roland Puissant had backed her to the tune of fifty grand six months before. The return on his stake had quadrupled since then. People from the Caribbean definitely did want to get jobs in England.

I didn't ask how much the "fee" they paid for this privilege was. Nor did I ask the rates they were paid once they started working in London. When you're investing in something, there are some details you just don't need to know about.

By the end of the evening — rather late, as it happened, because

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we'd moved on to a little drinking club I know round the back of Bond Street — Roland had agreed that the next week he'd introduce me to Felicia Rushworth.

It has to be said — she was bloody stunning. I mean, I've known a lot of girls, but Felicia Rushworth definitely took the Best of Show rosette. Generally speaking, I keep girls at arm's length. Of course I go around with a good few — everyone needs sex — but I don't let them get close. Always have to be on the lookout if you've come into a bit — lots of voracious females out there with their beady eyes fixed solely on the old inherited. So I've never even got near marriage. Never wanted to. Mind you, the sight of a creation like Felicia Rushworth could go a long way towards making a chap change his mind about that kind of thing.

She had this long blond hair that looked natural. I don't know much about that stuff, but if it wasn't natural it was damned cleverly done. Come to that, if it *was* natural, it was damned cleverly done.

Shrewd blue eyes. Intelligent. Normally, I don't look for that in a girl, but then what I'm looking for in most of them isn't a business partnership. Anyway, in Felicia's case, the intelligence in the eyes wasn't so overpowering they stopped being pretty.

And beautifully tanned skin. I suppose that's one of the perks of doing business with the Caribbean. Slender brown arms and endless brown legs, of whose unseen presence beneath the table I was aware right through that lunch at Nico at Ninety.

I'd suggested the venue. One of my regular bread-and-watering-holes. Sort of place that can impress clients when they need impressing. Mind you, Felicia Rushworth looked cool enough to take anything in her stride.

Roland was kind of formal with her. Don't know why I thought that odd. I'd probably assumed he knew her better than he did. After all, she was just someone he was doing business with. He was done up to the nines again, old Harrovian tie neatly in place. I think he was probably trying to impress her.

Felicia had a no-nonsense approach to the reason for our meeting. "Let's get the serious bit out of the way first," she said firmly. "Then we can enjoy the rest of our lunch."

And she spelled it all out to me. The more she said, the better I felt about the whole picture. That old Foulkes nose for a "good thing" was twitching like a ruddy dowsing rod. Felicia's long-term

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plan was to run the business completely on her own with her own savings, but in the short term she needed start-up capital. The experimental six months with Roland's fifty grand had worked so well that now she wanted to expand the operation—set up offices in London and Kingston, Jamaica, take on staff, put the whole affair on a more permanent footing.

"One thing I should ask at this point . . ." I said, "is about the legality of what's going on. Roland's told me it's kosher, and obviously I believe him, but in my experience you don't get the kind of profits we're talking about here without the odd rule being ever so slightly bent."

Felicia turned the full beam of those shrewd blue eyes on me. "You're not stupid, are you, Mr. Foulkes?"

I gave her a lazy grin back. "No. And please call me Nicky. Everybody does."

"All right, Nicky. Well, you've probably worked out that the area where the rules are being bent a little is round the work permits." I nodded, confirming her assumption that I was way ahead of her. "And yes, people involved in that area of the business are running risks. They're being well paid to run risks, but I suppose in a worst-case scenario they might get found out. In that eventuality, no blame could possibly be attached to the investors in the company . . . although, of course, trouble of that sort could cut down the kind of returns they'd get." Once again she fixed those unnerving blue eyes on mine. "But I'm looking for the kind of investor who likes risks."

"I like risks." Then I added, "In all areas of my life."

She didn't give me anything so rude as a wink, but I could see she'd salted the message away. There was now a kind of private bond between us, something that excluded Roland.

I moved briskly on. "So what size of investment are you looking for at the moment?"

"Over the next year I need a quarter of a million," she replied coolly. "Immediately a hundred thousand. Roland's supplying most of that, so I'm just looking for top-up funds at the moment."

"Top-up to the tune of how much?"

"Ten grand."

"What, Roland, you're already committed for the ninety?"

He nodded. "Seeing the return I got on fifty, can you blame me?"

"No." I was silent for a moment. "Pity I came in so late on the deal, isn't it?"

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"What do you mean?"

"Well, ten grand's not much of a stake for a real *risk-taker,* is it?" As I said the word, I fixed Felicia with my eye. She gave an almost imperceptible acknowledgement of the secret between us.

"There'll be more opportunities," she said soothingly. "Better for you to start small. See how it goes. I mean, the next six months may not go as well as the first. I don't want you to be out of pocket."

"Not much danger of that, is there?"

She shook her head firmly and, with a little smile, said, "No."

"So are you going in for the ten grand, Nicky?" asked Roland.

"You try and stop me." I took a sip of wine. "You sure I can't go in for more, Felicia?"

"Absolutely positive."

"But look, if you're after a quarter of a million over the next year, surely I could—"

The blue eyes turned to steel. "Mr. Foulkes, I am offering you a stake of ten thousand pounds in my business. That is the offer. Ten grand—no more. Take it or leave it."

Felicia Rushworth was quite daunting in that mode. I left it there for the rest of the lunch. But I was a bit miffed. She'd opened up this glowing prospect to me, and then severely limited my access to it. Ten grand's nothing to an entrepreneur like me. I knew this was a really good thing, and I wanted to be into it a lot deeper than that.

Still, we didn't talk about it further, just enjoyed Nico Ladenis's cooking. Bloody good. Makes you realise just how bad the garbage is you get dished up at places like Blake's. We got through a couple of rather decent bottles of Pouilly Fumé too.

Which inevitably led to Roland and me needing an excursion to the Gents. It was there that I moved on to the next stage of the plan I'd been forming during the lunch.

"Any chance of my getting in for more, do you reckon?" I asked casually.

"Mm?" Roland was preoccupied with his zip.

"More than ten grand . . . in Felicia's little scheme. . . . I mean, ten grand's nothing. . . . I want to be a serious player."

Roland grimaced. "Hm . . . Felicia's a strong-willed lady. She says she'd let you in for ten grand, that's what she means. Probably just protecting herself. I mean, she doesn't know much about you—only what I've told her. I know you're the genuine article,

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but you can't blame her for being cautious. There're a lot of villains about, you know."

"You don't need to tell me that. Do you think it's worth my having another go—asking Felicia straight out if I can invest more?"

He jutted out a dubious lower lip. "Like I say, when she's decided something . . ." He turned thoughtfully to wash his hands in the basin. "Tell you what," he said after a moment, ". . . I could cut you in on a bit of mine."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, so long as I give Felicia the ninety grand, she's not going to know where it comes from. If you give me another ten, your stake goes up to twenty, doesn't it?"

"Yes, but that's cutting down your profits, isn't it?"

Roland Puissant shrugged. "I did all right first time round. Got a few other good things I could divert the spare into."

"What are they?"

"Hm?" He shook the water off his hands and reached for a towel.

"The other good things?"

He grinned at me and shook his head. "Have to keep some secrets, you know, Nicky."

"Okay. Point taken." I straightened my old Etonian tie in the mirror. "You wouldn't consider letting me in for more than another ten . . . . ?"

We haggled a bit, but basically I got what I was after. I'd pay ten grand to Felicia and forty to Roland. She'd get the promised ninety from him, and not know that I'd contributed nearly half of it. Then Roland would account the profits back to me.

I felt pretty pleased with my day's work. Though I say it myself, I'm a bloody good negotiator. And I had achieved a fifty-grand stake in one of the most lucrative little projects I'd ever heard of: Lunch for three at Nico at Ninety was a small price to pay.

Struck me as I was walking down Park Lane from the restaurant that in fact I was almost going into the family business. The Foulkes fortune had been built up by ferrying Africans across the Atlantic. What I was now involved in was ferrying them back the other way. Rather neat, I thought.

"I just feel so dreadful about this."

Roland Puissant looked pretty dreadful too. We were at dell'Ugo, noisy as ever but smashing nosh. "Tell me about it," I said.

"I'm almost embarrassed to."

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"Come on, you don't have to be embarrassed with me. I'm unembarrassable. Anyway, I'm a mate, aren't I? Not to mention a business partner. You, me, and Felicia, eh?"

"That's it. Felicia," he said glumly.

"Come on, me old kipper. Pour it all out."

And he did. It was bad.

Basically we'd been had. Felicia Rushworth had calmly taken our money and gone off to Jamaica with it. Whether there actually was any employment agency business seemed doubtful. Whether there was some useful contact at the Home Office who could fix work permits for Caribbean visitors seemed even more doubtful. Roland and I had fallen for the oldest ploy in the book—a pretty girl with a convincing line of patter.

"And I just feel so guilty towards you," Roland concluded. "I should never have mentioned the project to you."

"Oh, now come on. I have to take my share of the blame too. You never volunteered anything. You never wanted to talk about it. Every detail I got out of you was like drawing a tooth."

"Yes, but I shouldn't have got you involved. Or I should have seen to it that your stake stayed at ten grand."

"Well, you didn't. You were bloody generous to me about that, Roland. At the time you were taking a considerable potential loss just to give me a chance."

"A chance I bet you wish now you hadn't taken?"

"Look, it's done. I did it. Maybe I was bloody stupid but I did it. If you take risks, some of them are going to pay off and some aren't. Anyway we're in the same boat—both of us fifty grand to the bad . . ." My words trailed off at the sight of his face. "You mean more than fifty . . . ?"

Roland Puissant nodded wretchedly. "Practically cleaned me out, I'm afraid."

"But I thought you said you'd got a lot of other good things going?"

"Yes, I did. Trouble is, all of those were recommended by Felicia. She generously took care of those investments too."

"Oh. So she's walked off with the whole caboodle?"

"About one point two million in all," he confessed.

I whistled. "Bloody hell. That is a lot."

"Yes. God, I'm stupid. I suppose . . . someone who looks like that . . . someone who's as intelligent as that . . . it just never occurs to you that they'd . . . I was putty in her hands. Is there anything

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more ridiculous than a man of my age playing the fool because of a pretty face? Some of us just never learn, eh?"

I didn't tell him how closely I identified with what he was saying. Instead, I moved the conversation on. "Question is . . . what're we going to do about it?"

"Bloody well get revenge!" Roland spat the words out. I'd never seen him so angry.

"How?"

"I don't know." He shook his head hopelessly. "No idea. Mind you, if I was out in Jamaica, I could do something. . . ."

"Like what?"

"I know people out there. People who could put pressure on Felicia. Reckon they could persuade her to return our money."

"Are you talking about criminals?"

He shrugged. "Often hard to say where legitimate business practice stops and criminality starts, wouldn't you say? But yes, this lot's means of persuasion are perhaps more direct than traditional negotiations."

"Would she get hurt?" The words came out instinctively. Whatever Felicia might have done to us, the idea of injury to that fragile beauty was appalling.

"She's a shrewd cookie. I think she'd assess the options and come across with the goods before they started hurting her."

"So you think we'd get the money back?"

"Oh yes. I mean, obviously we'd have to pay something for the . . . er, hired help . . . so we wouldn't get everything back . . . but we wouldn't be that much out of pocket."

"Well, then, for God's sake, let's do it."

Roland Puissant gave me a lacklustre look. "Yeah, great. How? I told you, she's cleaned me out."

"Couldn't I go to Jamaica and organise it?"

"Wish you could." He shook his head slowly. "Unfortunately, the people whose help we need are a bit wary of strangers. They know me, they've dealt with me before. But the last unfamiliar bloke who tried to make contact with them . . . ended up with his throat cut."

"Ah."

"No, I'm sorry. It'd have to be me or no one. But . . ." He spread his hands despairingly wide. ". . . I don't currently have the means to fly to Jamaica — let alone bribe the local villains. At the moment I'd be pushed to raise the bus fare to Piccadilly Circus."

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"Well, look, let me sub you, Roland."

"Now don't be ridiculous, Nicky. You're already down fifty grand. I absolutely refuse to let you lose any more."

"Look, it's an investment for me. It's my only chance of getting my fifty grand back."

He still looked dubious. "I don't like the idea of you . . ."

"Roland," I said, "I insist."

It was nearly a month later when Roland next rang me. He was calling from Heathrow. "I wanted to get through to you as soon as possible. I've had one hell of a time over in Jamaica, I'm afraid."

"Any success?"

"Not immediately, no. I was just beginning to get somewhere, but then the money ran out and—"

"You got through the whole ten grand I subbed you?"

"Yes. As I said, the kind of help I was enlisting doesn't come cheap."

"But why didn't they come up with the goods? I thought you said they'd just put the frighteners on Felicia and she'd stump up the cash."

"That's how it should have worked, yes. But I'm afraid she was a step ahead of us."

"In what way?"

"She'd hired some muscle of her own. I'm afraid what I got into was like full-scale gang warfare. Bloody nasty at times, let me tell you. This time last week I didn't reckon I'd ever see Heathrow again."

"Really? What, you mean your life was at—"

"You don't want to hear all this, Nicky. It's not very interesting. Main point is, I've let you down. I said I'd go over there and get your money back and I haven't. And I've spent your extra ten grand. In fact, you're now sixty grand down, thanks to me."

"Listen, Roland, I walked into it quite knowingly. If you want to blame anyone, blame me. Blame my judgement."

"That's very sporting of you to put it like that, but I can't buy it, I'm afraid. You're out of pocket and it's my fault. But don't worry, I'll see you get your money back."

"How? You've lost one point two million."

"I know, but there's stuff I can do. There's something I'm trying to set up right now, actually. And if that doesn't work out, I'll take another mortgage on the house. Anything to stop this awful guilt.

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I can't stand going round with the permanent feeling that I've let an old chum down."

"Roland, you're getting things out of proportion. I won't hear of you mortgaging your house just for my sake. We can sort this thing out. Best thing you can do is get a good night's sleep and we'll meet up in the morning. See where we stand then, eh?"

"Well, if you . . ."

"I insist."

"Where're we going to meet?"

"Roland, you don't by any chance play Real Tennis, do you?"

Don't know if you know the Harbour Club. Chelsea, right on the river. Converted old power station, actually, but they've done it bloody well. Very high spec. Pricey, of course, but then you have to pay for class. And the clientele is, it has to be said, pretty damn classy.

Anyway, I try to play Real Tennis down there at least once a week. Enjoy the game, and it stops the body seizing up totally. Good way of sweating out a hangover too, so I tend to go for a morning court.

I thought it'd be just the thing to sort out old Roland. He'd sounded frankly a bit stressed on the phone, but I reckoned a quick canter round the court might be just the thing to sort him out. I was glad to hear he knew the game—not many people do—but surprised when he said he'd played it for the school. I didn't know Harrow had a Real Tennis court. Still, Roland was at the place and I wasn't, so I guess he knew what he was talking about.

I said we should play the game first, to kind of flush out the old system, and then talk over a drink. Roland wasn't so keen on this—his guilt hadn't gone away and he wanted to get straight down to the schemes he had for replacing my money—but I insisted and won the day. I can be quite forceful when I need to be.

I must say his game was pretty rusty. He said he hadn't played since school but in the interim he seemed to have forgotten most of the rules. I mean, granted they are pretty complicated—if you don't know them, I haven't got time to explain all about penthouses and galleries and tambours and grilles and things now—but I thought for anyone who had played a bit, they'd come back pretty quickly. Not to poor old Roland Puissant, though. Acted like he'd never been on a Real Tennis court in his life.

Still, I suppose he was preoccupied with money worries.

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Though, bless his heart, he seemed to be much more concerned about my sixty grand than his own one point two million. I think he was just an old-fashioned gentleman who hated the idea of being in debt to anyone — particularly a friend of long-standing. The idea really gnawed away at him.

The game seemed to come back to him a bit more by the end of the booking and, when our time was up, we'd got into quite a decent knock-up. Enough to work up a good sweat, anyway, and dictate that we had showers before we got stuck into the sauce.

It was when Roland was stripped off that I noticed how tanned he was. Except for the dead white strip where his swimming shorts had been, he was a deep, even brown all over.

"I say," I joked as he moved into the shower, "you been spending all my money lying about sunbathing, have you, Roland?"

He turned on me a look of surprising intensity. "Damn, I didn't want you to see that," he hissed.

"Why? My suggestion true then, is it?" I still maintained the joshing tone, but for the first time a little trickle of suspicion seeped into my mind.

"No, of course not," Roland replied impatiently. "This happened when I got captured."

"You got captured? You didn't tell me."

"No, well, I . . . No point in your knowing, really — nothing you could do about it now. And I . . . well, I'd rather not think about it." He looked genuinely upset now. I'd stirred up some deeply unpleasant memories.

"What did they do to you, Roland?" I asked gently.

"Oh, they . . . Well, they stripped me off down to my boxer shorts and left me strapped out in the sun for three days."

"Good God."

He gave me a brave, wry grin. "One way to get a suntan, eh? Though there are more comfortable ones."

"But if you were strapped down . . ." I began logically ". . . wouldn't you just be tanned on your front *or* your back? . . . unless of course your captors came and turned you over every few hours." I chuckled.

Roland's eyes glowed painfully with the memory as he hissed, "Yes, they did. That's exactly what they did. So that I'd have to have the pressure of my body bearing down on my sunburnt skin."

"Good heavens! And those scratches on your back — were they part of the torture too?"

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"Scratches?"

I pointed to a few scrapes that looked as if they might have been made by clutching fingernails.

"Oh yes," said Roland. "Yes, that was when they . . ." He coloured and shook his head. "I'm sorry, I'd really rather not talk about it."

"I fully understand, old man." I patted him on the shoulder. "Still, you escaped with your life."

"Yes." He gritted his teeth. "Touch and go on a few occasions, but I escaped with my life. . . ." He sighed mournfully. "Though sadly not with your money."

"Don't worry. We'll have another go. We'll get our revenge on Felicia Rushworth one way or the other."

"Hope so," said Roland ruefully as he ducked in under the spray of his shower.

At that moment his mobile phone rang. It was in the clothes locker he had just opened. "Shall I get it?" I asked.

"Well, perhaps I should—"

I pressed the button to establish contact. The caller spoke immediately. It was a voice I recognised.

I held the receiver across to Roland, who had emerged from the shower rubbing his eyes with a towel. "Felicia Rushworth," I said.

He looked shocked as he took the phone. He held his hand over the receiver. "Probably better if I handle this privately," he said, and moved swiftly from the changing room area to the corridor outside.

I sat down on the wooden bench, deep in thought. The words Felicia Rushworth spoke before she realised the wrong person had answered had been: "Roland, is the idiot still buying the story?"

Now I'm a pretty shrewd guy, and I smelled a rat. For a start, Felicia's tone of voice had sounded intimate, like she and Roland were on the same side rather than ferocious adversaries. Also, if one was looking round for someone to cast in the role of the "idiot" who was hopefully "buying the story" . . . well, there weren't that many candidates.

Roland's wallet was in the back pocket of his trousers, hanging in the locker. Normally I wouldn't pry into a chap's private possessions, but, if the ugly scenario slowly taking shape in my brain was true, then these weren't normal circumstances.

Nothing in the wallet had the name "Roland Puissant" on it. All the credit cards were imprinted with "R. J. D. Rushworth." In the

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jacket pocket I found a book of matches from the Sunshine Strand Luxury Hotel, Montego Bay, Jamaica.

I heard the door to the changing room clatter closed and looked up. "Roland" was holding the phone, and had a towel wrapped round his waist.

"God, she's got a nerve, that woman — bloody ringing me up to taunt me about what she's done."

"Oh yes?"

He must've caught something in my tone, because he looked at me sharply. "What's up, old man?"

"The game, I would say, 'Roland Puissant.'"

He looked genuinely puzzled. "Look, I'm sorry. I told you I haven't played for a while, bit rusty on the old—"

"Not that game. You know exactly what I mean."

"Do I?"

I hadn't moved from the bench. I'd curbed my anger, not even raised my voice while I assessed how I was going to play the scene.

I still didn't raise my voice as I said, "I've just looked in your wallet. All your credit cards are in the name of 'R. J. D. Rushworth.'"

"Yes," he replied in a matter-of-fact way. "I only got back last night. I haven't got round to changing them yet."

"What do you mean? Aren't you R. J. D. Rushworth?"

He looked at me incredulously. "Of course I'm not, Nicky. For God's sake — you know I'm Roland Puissant, don't you? But you surely never thought I was going to travel to Jamaica under my own name, did you? I didn't want to advertise to Felicia what I was up to."

For a second I was almost convinced, until another discordant detail struck me. "But why, of all the names in the world, did you choose her name — 'Rushworth'?"

"Well, I had to get to see her, didn't I? Felicia's got her security pretty well sorted out. I had to pretend to be her husband, so that they'd let me through *to* her."

"But the minute she saw you, your cover'd be blown."

"That was a risk I was prepared to take." He winced. "An ill-advised one, as it turned out."

"What do you mean?"

"I'd been hoping that I'd get to see her on her own, but a couple of her heavies took me in. Well, I had no chance then, had I?"

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"That's when the torturing started?"

He nodded, then shook his head. "I'd rather not talk about it, if you don't mind."

My heart went out to him. Poor bugger, not only had he lost all his money and been tortured by Caribbean thugs, now one of his best friends was suspecting him of . . .

Just a minute. Just a minute, I said to myself, hold your horses there, old man. The way he'd accounted for the credit cards was maybe feasible, but it didn't explain the words with which Felicia had opened her telephone call.

"When I answered your phone," I began coolly, "Felicia, presumably thinking she'd got through to you, said: 'Roland, is the idiot still buying the story?' . . ."

"Yes," he agreed, totally unfazed.

"Well, would you like to explain to me what she meant by that, because I'm not much enjoying the only explanation my mind's offering."

Roland looked torn. At last he sighed and said, "Well, all right. I suppose I'll have to tell you. I wanted to keep it a secret, but . . ." He sighed again. "Nicky, you've heard of Jeffrey Archer?"

"Hm? Yes, of course I have, but what the hell's he got to do with what we're talking about?"

"Well, you may know that he lost a lot of money in an investment that went wrong . . ."

"Yes. I've heard the story."

". . . and then he fixed the situation by writing his way out of it."

"Mm."

"He sold books and ideas for books and made another huge fortune from that."

"Yes, I still don't see—"

"That's what I've been trying to do, Nicky. I've felt so absolutely lousy about the way you've lost money over this—and all because of me—that I've been trying to sell a book idea so that I can pay you back."

"Really?"

"Yes. I've worked out a synopsis for this story about a conman and—touch wood—it's looking good. There's a publisher who's expressing interest—strong interest. Trouble is, I was stupid enough to mention this to Felicia when I was in Jamaica, and now of course she'll never let me hear the end of it. She's tickled to death that she's driven me to try and make money as a writer."

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"So what she said . . . ?"

"Exactly. She was talking about this publisher . . . for whom she doesn't have a lot of respect. That's why she said, 'Roland, is the idiot still buying the story?'"

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"And the answer," Roland went on, "is — please God — yes. Because if the idiot *does* buy the story, then I have a chance of paying back at least some of the money that my foolish advice has cost one of my best mates—Nicky Foulkes."

I felt very humbled, you know, by the way Roland was taking my troubles on himself in this way. And to think of the suspicions I'd been within an ace of voicing about him. Well, thank God some instinct stopped me from putting them into words.

Even a nature as generous and loyal as Roland Puissant's might have found that kind of accusation a bit hard to take. Sort of thing that could ruin a really good friendship.

Roland's back in the country again. Called me a couple of days ago. He's been having a dreadful time. Well, we'd both agreed after Felicia managed to escape him in Jamaica, he should have another go to try and retrieve our money. He went on again about mortgaging his house, but I said, don't be daft, we're in this together, and stumped up a bit of ante for his expenses.

Trouble was, when he got to Jamaica, he found Felicia'd moved on. To Acapulco. So he's had to spend the last month down there trying to find her and put the pressure on. Poor bugger, rather him than me, I must say. But one can't but admire his dedication. I'm lucky to have someone like him out there rooting away on my behalf.

Anyway, we've fixed to get together next week. Roland's a bit busy at the moment. But he's making time to meet up with me. Letting me take him out for dinner at Bibendum. Expensive, I know, but it'll be a small price to pay. Roland never stops, you know. Always grafting away on some new scheme or other. He's got a whole lot of new investment opportunities he's going to put my way. If I play my cards right, you know, I think I could be on to another good thing. ●

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SOLID GOLD FRIENDSHIP

Vivian M. Harper

My friend and I went huntin' gold
Way back in '43
We trekked and dug the summer long
No gleaming did we see.
Then in the Fall we found a wall
Most solid gold for sure.
Till then the call was "half of all,"
Our friendship will endure.
But treasure fine can trick the mind
And taint the clean and pure.

Supplies were gone—we had to leave
Or be caught in Winter's snow
"Let's get below—outrun the snow
And register this claim.
Let's finish off the food my friend
To sustain us on the way.
My pack's all rigged and ready and—but
What's that you're trying to say?
A lonely bowl of beans was left?
Not enough for two? You ate them?
Well that's all right my friend
The poison's all for you."

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DEMONS

by Doug Allyn

For a real change of pace, here's a short-short by an author whose stories for *EQMM* usually approach novella length. The vignette originated from a request by the Swiss magazine *Das Magazin* for an 800-word crime piece. We reprint it here for the first time in the U.S.!

"The last time I was in a principal's office, I was in deep trouble," Booth said, glancing around the narrow room. His rumpled raincoat and hollow eyes gave him the look of a vampire junkie who'd missed his fix.

"If anyone's in trouble, it should be me," Miller said. "As principal, the children are my responsibility. Shouldn't you two be looking for the girl?"

"We have uniformed officers canvassing the area, Mr. Miller," Raelean Chapman said. "We're hoping you can help narrow the search. If you'd like to call your lawyer, it's your right."

"Are you implying I'm a suspect?" The balding, pudgy little bureaucrat seemed more surprised than concerned.

"Hell, no," Booth snorted. "Unless you're schmuck enough to ask for a lawyer. That was a ploy, Mr. Miller. A head game. My new partner's not exactly subtle, is she? All we want is some background info on your staff, Mr. Miller, teachers, janitors, especially anyone you think might be involved."

"I don't understand," Miller said, still wary. "The girl disappeared from the playground during recess. Why ask about teachers? They would have been in the building."

"Just covering the bases," Booth said. "My guess is, she's a runaway. And her teacher seemed drifty to me. Could she be mistaken about when the kid went missing?"

"It's . . . possible," Miller conceded. "Mrs. Linowitz is a bit lax in taking attendance, though I've never noted it on her record."

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"Why not?" Raelean asked. "Isn't taking attendance—"

"It's probably academic anyway," Booth said, cutting her off. "The girl's in foster care and she's run off before. Street kids are like mice; they're cute, but nobody wants them around."

"Somebody wanted this one," Raelean snapped.

"Possibly," Booth conceded, unfazed. "But if she was snatched, maybe she was lucky. Most of these girls are so hungry for love they practically wear signboards. Check out the kids on the playground."

"Shouldn't we concentrate on the missing girl?" Raelean asked, joining Miller and Booth at the window.

"I want to show you why she's missing," Booth said. "See the girl by the swings? How old is she, Mr. Miller?"

"In the pink dress? I — believe she's in Mrs. Finn's fifth-grade class. Ten or eleven, I suppose."

"Wrong, she's nineteen, pushing thirty-one. Look at her pose. Strictly MTV. Madonna, maybe Courtney Love. Probably nibbles her lips for that bee-stung look. Baby-doll sleaze. Between the tube and flicks, she's seen more raw sex than our parents ever did. Any day now, she'll swap herself for a trip to the mall or a gangbanger's jacket and lose her last chance to ever know real love. A ten-year-old slut. What a waste."

The oil in Booth's voice made Raelean's skin crawl. She was about to tell him to shut his filthy mouth when she noticed Miller. The principal had gone gray, his face agleam with perspiration. Raelean turned away, casually, keeping him at the edge of her field of vision. She saw Booth brush Miller's hand with his fingertips, then lean toward him to whisper something. Miller looked up into Booth's eyes for a moment. Then he misted up and slumped against him. And he told them.

They found the girl's body in the park, covered with leaves, exactly as Miller described it. Raelean felt for a pulse, but they were too late. Years too late. Booth kept his distance from the body. Avoided looking at it. Raelean rose slowly and faced him.

"How did you know?" she asked. "Miller has no record. He's too old for the profile. He wasn't a logical suspect."

"Opportunity," Booth said simply. "She was a street kid. She wouldn't have gone off with a stranger, and, as he said, the teachers were in the building."

"It was more than that. I watched you work him. That mono-

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logue about the girl on the playground was for him, wasn't it? So you already knew. What did you whisper to him?"

"Just the usual touchy-feely drivel: You're not alone; I understand. Nothing much."

"Then maybe it was the way you said it. You put on a helluva show for him, Booth. If that's what it was."

"Meaning what?"

"You tell me. You're the expert on molesters. But I'm not surprised he believed you: I believed you."

"If you're implying that it takes one to know one, maybe you'd be happier with another partner."

"No, I chose this assignment because I've got kids of my own. I want to nail molesters and you're the best in the business at it. So we're going to work together. Unless you really want me to ask the captain for a transfer. And tell him why."

He hesitated, then shrugged. "No. No need for that."

"Then talk to me. Straight up. What the hell kind of a game was that you ran on Miller?"

"I'm not sure I can explain it," he said slowly. "They're dying to tell us, you know? They've had an incredibly intense experience. They want to share it, but they need to talk to someone who can empathize. So you look inside yourself and come up with something that relates to . . . what he's done. So that when you tell him you understand, he believes you."

"Because it's true, you mean? My God. Do you know what you're saying?"

"You asked me what works. I'm trying to tell you. The truth is, we all have demons, if we look deep enough. So the only question is: Do the demons have us?"

"And do they, Booth? Do your demons have you?"

His eyes met hers, and, just for an instant, she glimpsed the darkness in them. And in him.

"Not yet," he said. ●

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The Route to Bruton Marshes

by Jeffry Scott

The supermarket had been derelict for a couple of years. Behind the building, the parking lot's asphalt was cracking and buckling from underground assault by weeds. A foot-high chestnut seedling grew in the slot once reserved for the manager. Recycling banks — giant bins for salvaged bottles and paper — had not been collected after the store closed. Detective-sergeant Nick Flinders hid the car beyond them, set one exterior mirror so that he could see the entrance without being seen, and was ready for business.

Nesta Eldred, long thighs gleaming at the corner of his eye, perfume at once musky and sharp, chemically pungent, sniggered, "It's like we'd sneaked in here for a bit of naughty." She was the kind of

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woman Aubrey Beardsley had imagined: all black and white, pale skin against sable hair, sweater, noticeably short skirt. Her boots were dagger-toed and needle-heeled. Deep shadows, real or painted, accented knowing eyes. Beardsley would have put her in a sinuous pose and costume fit for a madonna of decadence; Mrs. Eldred was just doing the best with what she had left.

Flinders knew she wasn't coming on to him. It was just Nesta's way with men, any and all of them. "How is old Jim?" he countered snidely.

"Guess." It wasn't cryptic, given that her husband was not only a drunken clown but as poor a provider as he was a committed, luckless gambler.

It is of London's mean streets that Jeffry Scott writes in his Rosetta Street stories. As early as 1916, the English novelist and short-story writer Thomas Burke was exploring London's underside in his adventures set in the Chinatown of the time. The mean-streets theme has become more popular with British writers of our day, and many of their stories are reminiscent of American hardboiled fiction, though Jeffry Scott's Rosetta Street cops have many thoroughly British characteristics.

Flinders gunned the engine to encourage the heater on a typical English summer day, August impersonating November. The silence was less than companionable; they watched an empty, windblown paper bag scrambling across the lot. Finally he prompted, "You asked for a meet on the quiet. I can't read minds."

"Ground rules first." Naturally pale as she was, Nesta's knuckles were whiter. "This stays between the two of us, I'm not going into no witness box. Promise me that."

"Grow up," he retorted, though amiably. "Supposing you turn round and break the news you've just tried out the bread knife on Jim's throat? Right dumbo I'd look, after giving my word not to split."

"You know what I mean. Give me a break, think I want to talk to a copper? I wouldn't, only . . ." He was mildly surprised to find that Nesta was not simply edgy but subtlty cowed. Her throat pulsed. "Anyway, nothing I say is, like, *evidence*. But if I kept it to

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myself and then, uh . . . anything happened — I'd never sleep again."

Nick Flinders doubted that. Nesta Eldred's track record on the fringes of crime made her an unlikely martyr to conscience. But something was on her mind. Live and learn: In the intensely unlawful triangle of London between Rosetta Street, Great Northern Prospect, and Cap-a-Pie Lane, she was one of the last people he would have expected to flirt with the idea of turning informer.

Guessing his reaction, she grimaced and shook her head. "Don't get your hopes up. I want you to stop a stroke being pulled, don't go expecting me to grass anyone up."

"Perish the thought." Nesta might not appreciate sarcasm but she had crossed a divide by approaching him; now nothing would stop her confiding in him. It would not come easily, however.

"Funny," she mused, "Mum nagged me silly to go for a secretary when I finished school — thought that was the dog's bollocks, working in an office. She carried on alarming when I went to the pickle factory instead. Fifteen quid a week, see, big money then.

"Took me years to see what she was getting at. Miracle I kept Jim's paws off enough of my wages to go on one of them courses and now I'm a WP op. That's what they call it. Word processing, might as well say typist but it's all fancy labels these days. No such thing as secretaries anymore, personal assistants and Girl Fridays and God knows what."

Flinders, who had stopped smoking again recently, drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "There's a point to all this?"

She twisted to face him. "Shut your face and you might find out."

"Long as it's before sunset."

Nesta stared at him for a moment. "There was a time when blokes dreamed of being in a motor with me, round the back somewhere, steaming the windows up."

Forty and counting, nearer fifty, Nesta remained attractive in a haggardly vivid manner. He had no intention of confirming that; she was an awkward customer as it was. . . . Shrugging, she resumed her address to the windshield. "I'm working at McGrath's, back of the Lane, it's a swag shop. Not burglar's swag—"

"Stuff for fairgrounds," he cut in wearily, "prizes and so forth. Not much call for that lately, so Billy McGrath's switched to promotional goods—pens and balloons and gear like that, giveaways for filling stations, pubs, stores."

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"You got it. There's just four of us in the office. I do invoices mainly, bit of debt-chasing on the phone. The others look after letters and circulars. Tell you who else works there.... June Prior, Padre's wife."

"A celebrity," Flinders suggested. Padre (properly Patric) Prior was an armed robber, among other trades. His nickname a coded warning that Patric Prior didn't believe in taking prisoners; crossing him invited the services of a priest. Detective-inspector Caradoc had been casting a cold eye on the man for a long while.

"Padre's all right," Nesta snapped. "June, though, she can be an evil cow. He has the rep, I can't deny he's a rough 'un, but *her!*"

Nesta Eldred and June Stagg — the eventual Mrs. Prior — had grown up in adjacent streets and attended the same school; always on overtly good terms. Flinders had taken them for firm friends. Until now he had never heard anything against Prior's wife. No reason to, Prior being of a generation and tribe that expected their women to be submissive, unobtrusive, if only in public.

Nesta digressed, or appeared to. "June's the office manager at McGrath's. She got me the job there. Gives her a kick, having me under her thumb. When we knocked around together, years ago, guess which of us was the cracker and who was her plain friend. . . . Wait long enough and everything changes in this life. Still, I keep a smile on my face while she lays down the law. Got to, when you're the breadwinner. Padre's always round there, the office—"

Interrupting again, Flinders asked, "What does Bill McGrath make of that? He's got no time for hounds, used to be a Special Constable, big law-and-order chap."

"McGrath's got his name up outside, but Padre owns the place," she explained drily. "The business nearly went bust, recession gutted it; Padre put in a daffy of money. He brings June to work and collects her most nights. Shows up early and hangs around. He isn't the ideal husband all of a sudden, mind — more keeping an eye on an investment."

Flinders yawned a mute appeal for her to stop rambling. In fact, he was savouring a tidbit. Already their encounter was paying off. Prior's involvement with an apparently legitimate company was news to him.

"June doesn't like him being there so much. Keeps saying she can make her own way home, that's what taxis are for." Nesta snorted derisively.

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"It's down to jealousy, see. All women there, bar McGrath, so in her twisted little mind Padre must be sniffing round after one of the girls. She's always been jealous and he makes her worse. You know how some fellers are in a roomful of skirts. Padre gives it loads of chat, sucks his belly in, and struts. Pathetic, sure, but only natural, except June can't get her head round it.

"And she can't stop him, neither, though she'd love to. He's got a hell of a temper, we all know that. Go too far, and she'd get a good old right-hander, maybe a kicking, Padre can't stop hisself when he gets going. So she lays off him and goes after any young tart he looks at crosswise." Nesta's tone, too strained for mere gossip, took Flinders aback.

"I'm not quite with you, luv . . ."

"Look, you ever say I told you this, I'll deny every word. Remember the barmaid at the Feathers, three, four years ago, when that new bloke took over? Called herself Cheryl but I happen to know it was Doris. All her goods in the shop window, couldn't show more if she pulled pints in her bra and knickers. Did wonders for trade at the Feathers."

Nick Flinders consulted his memory, retrieving a flash of spectacular hair and borderline-grotesque bosom. "Yeah, she was tasty, if you like 'em obvious. But she didn't stay long."

"Right," Nesta agreed flatly. "Landlord reckoned she did a runner with a bloke. A rich one, 'cause Cheryl, so-called, had a room above the pub and left all her blessed gear there, dresses, shoes, the lot. Not that I'd give tuppence for them, she always looked like she was on the game."

"Writes our fashion correspondent."

"Don't be smart with me! Padre had a fling with that girl, June was beside herself. She'd come round my place and punish the vodka and out it all came, how she felt." Nesta started pleating the hem of her short skirt, blindly, no question of display.

"I'm not saying nothing, only Cheryl did a runner and was too scared to come back for her stuff—and that wasn't Padre's doing, he was asking around for her, dead choked because she dropped him."

"You're telling me June Prior frightened her off? Milk and water little thing like June, five-foot-nuthin' tall? Well, I suppose if it was another woman she had a go at . . ."

"Don't stick words in my mouth, I never said it was June. But it's a free country, nobody has a right to go around saying who

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goes and who stays. You're the copper, threats is illegal, aren't they?" The next words were almost inaudible: "It's starting up again, and I will not stand for it."

Sceptical, Flinders argued, "Barmaids, pretty 'uns, are always on the move. But I could see if she will confirm having been hassled."

"Good luck! Cheryl's a runaway. Usual story, she slung her hook from up North somewhere when she was sixteen. Told me all about it one night, you had to feel sorry for her. Landlord at the Feathers cleared out that staff flat, needed it for the next girl, so if there was letters or anything . . . No way of finding her now, not that she would own up to what happened."

Tugging the skirt down, Nesta said, "There's a girl at McGrath's looks very like Cheryl. This one's Heidi, if you please — eighteen, and super. Most of us was, at her age, but Heidi could be a model. Padre kids around with her, plays the big man, eyes out on stalks. Nothing to it. She's young enough for his daughter and big-headed with it. If he made a pass she'd wet herself laughing. He knows that. Padre's a slave to his you-know-what, but not a complete bloody fool. He just ogles." (Nesta pronounced it "oggles") "I doubt she even notices. But June's getting worked up over it and when she gets worked up — well, never you mind."

"Have you tried telling Heidi to watch her step?"

"Do me favours! The girl's a princess, doesn't have to be bright — do more harm than good, saying anything. For one, she wouldn't listen, and two, she's stupid enough to go blabbing to June and then I'm in bother as well. I need that job."

Nesta's tone thinned and harshened once more. "You can tell — I can, leastways — when June is up to strokes. She gets sweeter than sugar and that's a bad sign. She's treating the kid like her bestest mate, teacher's pet. Those other silly mares don't like it but they ought to thank their stars." She shivered unaffectedly. "It's like watching a spider and a fly. You got to do something about it."

Great, he was being recruited in a female feud seeded by heaven knew what petty resentments. Jealousy of a younger colleague, no doubt, despite Nesta Eldred's version of events. "Do something . . . such as?"

She reached for the door handle, eyes narrowed, lips peeling back. "Talk to June, tell her you know what's in the wind — but keep me out of it."

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"Give over," said Flinders. "Warn her on what grounds? I'm a copper, not her parish priest. Padre's lawyer would complain over harassment if I so much as tipped my hat to Mrs. P. without a damned good reason."

But the car door had slammed behind Nesta and he was talking to himself.

She was right on one score: Cheryl, former belle of the Feathers in Strathway Street, was hard to find.

It took days to confirm something as basic as the barmaid's surname, which was Botton. There were no work records; Ms. Botton, whose real first name might well be Doris, had never bought National Insurance stamps or paid income tax. Obviously her income had come out of employers' hip pockets.

A non-person then, lost among tens of thousands who evade the Welfare State's net. They are above, or perhaps beneath, the law, dodging normal citizens' penalties and obligations. If "Cheryl Botton" had been run out of town by a baleful wife, she could not have afforded to make a fuss about it. Cheryl and her drifter sisterhood tend to be bad at making stands, much better at fleeing from trouble.

"What I want to know," said Inspector Caradoc, once Flinders brought him up to speed, "is where La Eldred fits in." With something akin to nostalgia he added, "She was a fantastic goer in her day, Nesta—er, so I've been told, you understand."

And less approvingly: "When her sort blow the whistle on another woman, there has to be a hidden agenda. Spoken like a true misogynist, which I'm not, but it's a fact of life. Men are equally bad, of course, but with them it's generally about money or territory. Predictable. Women are tricksy."

Caradoc, feet up on the blotter, brooded for a moment. "I've known Nesta a long time. Better rephrase that, from the dirty grin on your face — been aware of her, as a distant associate of Prior's through his wife. She and Nesta were close, once upon a time. Then Padre started earning big and Nesta's man didn't. Padre sussed Jim Eldred as a weakling, didn't want to know. Sensible, really—losers drag their mates down when they hit trouble. So Padre made his wife cool it."

"Nesta reckons June Prior got her that job at McGrath's, though," Flinders objected. "Funny way to snub her."

"Ah, but Eldred's a joke these days. Any competent brief could

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destroy him in minutes, if you put him in the box. Now he's no threat, Padre Prior doesn't care if June pals up with his wife again. More to the point, how much of Nesta's tale stands up?" the inspector demanded.

Nick Flinders, notes on his lap, didn't bother to consult them. "In nineteen ninety a barmaid we'll call Cheryl, for convenience, worked at the Feathers. Knockout girl. Seems that for a few months Prior was giving her one. No evidence for that but many, many little birds say he didn't haunt the Feathers for the beer.

"When Cheryl did a runner he appeared to be mortified, tried to find her. Okay, maybe his wife did give the girl her marching orders . . . but Padre's a devious bugger. He might have got sick of having June on his back about adultery, and sent Cheryl on her way with a black eye. Or a few hundred quid in her purse, to be a good girl and get lost. Guy like him would never own up to knuckling under to his wife.

"Concerning the rest of it, Prior does spend a lot of time at McGrath's, brings his wife to work and collects her most days. Chats up the female workforce, by all accounts. And there is a very pretty typist, beg her pardon, word-processing operator called Heidi Drage who works there.

"Day before yesterday I happened to be in the neighbourhood at lunchtime. June Prior and Heidi came out of McGrath's arm in arm, went to the wine bar. Smoked-salmon sandwiches and a six-quid bottle of white Bordeaux. June paid. Manager says she always pays, and they come in regularly. No signs of friction, Mine Host said, but you can't always tell with women . . . What I'm saying, Nesta Eldred's tale stands up, sort of—but it could be interpreted a dozen different ways.

"The only other thing is, I picked Nutty Slack's brain the other night—he retired before my time, memory like an elephant. Although June Prior has no form, Nutty says when she was a teenager she went after another lass at the Ritz ballroom—where the discount carpets place is now, corner of Bracken Road—with a hammer. Row about a feller.

"June was detained, blood all over her, but brazened it out, admitted nothing, and the victim refused to lay charges. She was a married woman, sneaked out to pull blokes while hubby was on night shift. So she wanted the whole thing dropped and forgotten."

"I never knew that," Caradoc murmured thoughtfully. "Prior's wife looks such a prim little number, too. No wonder that barmaid

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got out of town—I daresay June Prior said she'd risked an assault charge before and was ready for an encore."

Needlessly smoothing patent-leather hair, he cursed softly in Welsh. "Can't believe I am chewing over powder-room gossip! Bad as my wife. I tease her over being hooked on all those sexy soap operas, fretting if Jack is cheating on Jill and whether Tom or Dick will be next to have it off with Harriet. The nerve of Nesta Eldred, trying to drag us into a catfight—and that's the strength of it, mark my words."

But then he said, "Don't discourage her, though. There can be a few nuggets in girl talk. By the same token, don't push it." (A typical Inspector Caradoc edict, easier to frame than carry out.) "Play hard to get, Nick, make her come to you. If she does, deal me in beforehand, I want to play."

Not only women, Sergeant Flinders concluded, could be suspected of following hidden agendas.

Halfway into Nick Flinders's car, Nesta recoiled, but Caradoc was driving away again, giving her no option but to stay aboard. "I know, your meet was with somebody else. Think of this as a blind date," he urged.

"He told you, then. After we had a deal it was between me and him. Bloody coppers, and bloody fool me to trust one." Nesta glared at him, rubbing her knee, caught by a door yanked shut in panic.

"That takes care of the ritual remarks," the inspector sighed. "What's on your mind, dear?"

"None of this has anything to do with me, I can't be involved."

"Take that as read." Most of Caradoc's attention was on the road as he drove with smooth neatness, well above the urban speed limit. Twelve minutes later they were far from Rosetta Street, part of an anonymous row of vehicles parked nose-in beside a park's lake. "Now we're all cozy," he announced cheerfully.

No response. He sighed again. "It's more than you can handle, else you wouldn't be doing this one step forward, two steps back nonsense. Very nice for country dancing but I'm a busy man and you are in trouble, so why waste any more time?"

"Suppose I've got to trust you." She shrugged defeatedly. "All right . . . I think, I'm really afraid she's . . . you know, in danger. Heidi. Blabbermouth told you about Heidi, where I work, right?"

"Keep going, luv. I'll sing out if you lose me."

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"Wednesdays, June stays late. To fiddle the books and cover whatever her old man's share is, I daresay. Anyway, I'd got all the way to the bus stop and remembered my shopping under the desk, stuff for supper, so back I went. I was still downstairs when I heard them talking. Earwigged from down there, out of sight, then I made a lot of noise coming up for my stuff.

"I could tell from the way she'd been going on, sweeter than sugar, June was up to strokes. Spinning the kid a yarn about designer dresses, originals and what-have-you — stolen gear to be had for a song if they knew your face. Said she'd take Heidi to the place, but it must stay a secret, tell nobody. Heidi was all for it, she's fashion mad, they must have designer labels at her age. . . ."

Caradoc grimaced disappointedly. "Buying dodgy gear — them and half the women in London. So what?"

"Want me to draw pictures? Some night soon Heidi will go off with June, *nobody knowing where.* She won't have said who she is going with, neither."

Caradoc pulled another discontented face. "I won't even bother saying that's a very serious allegation. Because it's all in your mind. If Heidi does the disappearing act, we shall put your good friend through the wringer. You'll have marked our card in advance, take a gold star."

"Won't do the girl any good, you knowing who did it! Not when she's in . . . a ditch somewhere. Can't you get it through your thick head?" Nesta Eldred's breasts rose on an indrawn breath that was held for several heartbeats while she nerved herself. "June will very likely . . . she might harm her. She's not rational when she gets like this."

"But it's all hearsay," he nagged. "Nothing to go on, no cause to take action. For the sake of argument, I'll accept that Mrs. Prior is a violent, cunning woman, up to no good. Doesn't alter the position. Unless or until she makes a move, I'm helpless."

Nesta coughed abruptly, unless it was a sob.

"You're really worried about Heidi, aren't you," he observed, crassly.

"God knows why, she's nothing to me and I have always looked after Number One, nobody else will. But it's getting to me, what might happen." She broke off, fumbling at her purse. Caradoc passed a clean handkerchief and she wiped her eyes, leaving charcoal smears on the crumpled white square. "Heidi knows it all, sometimes I could slap her face. And it gets up my nose, way she

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reminds me I had all the fellers' tongues hanging out at her age. But if she went stepping off the kerb not looking, and a lorry was coming, I'd have to pull her back, right?"

"Very commendable." He waited a little. "There might be a way to fix the problem. . . . He doesn't know it, but Padre Prior is causing all this aggro. The catalyst, if you want a ten-bob word. Now . . . say he went inside. Not forever, a few years. Wouldn't June forget about being jealous? In her heart of hearts she might even be relieved. Pleased, even. Padre can't stray when he is a guest of Her Majesty."

Grasping the idea instantly, she was appalled. "I couldn't do that—you are an evil bastard."

"I must mention that to Mum, she never told me. . . . Come off it, I'm trying to help. Prior and some of the lads of the village hijacked a container truck last week. Cigarettes in bulk. Haven't been sold yet, so they have to be tucked away somewhere."

"I wouldn't know about that stuff. It's just, 'Hi, Nessie,' when he comes round the office, he doesn't tell me nothing. Can't be bothered. I'm June's mate, not his—and he's never been over the moon about that, either."

Caradoc, arm across the back of the seat, mouth near Nesta's ear, leaned even closer. "So you owe him nothing. The only way to get her off the warpath, far as I can make out, is to put hubby away. You've got some deciding to do: whether you care more about Heidi or Padre—who doesn't mean a toss to you. Do everyone a favour, find out about those ciggies. He's no stranger to jail, he can do it on his head."

She gasped as he lunged, but he was only reaching past to open the passenger door. "Off you go then, sorry not to be of more help."

"You can't leave me here, it's miles back to work!"

"Look for big red things, they're called buses and go all the way to Rosetta Street. You're a big girl, Nesta, you'll manage."

She still had his handkerchief, but Caradoc did not back up to ask for it. The rearview mirror caught Nesta Eldred's expression: He divined that she was not mouthing reminders to drive safely and give her best to Mrs. Caradoc and the kiddies.

The inspector was gratified, though not unduly surprised, two days afterwards, to be told that a pay-phone caller wanted him but refused to identify herself.

As soon as he spoke, the caller gabbled, "Regent Bingo in Amberley Road, the . . . things you said is in the basement. They'll

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be moving them any night now—bastard!"

"Compliments pass when the quality meet," he chuckled, hanging up with a flourish. Abuse was a small price to pay for the rest of Nesta Eldred's message.

"A nice little collar," said Detective-inspector Caradoc. Patric "Padre" Prior had been watched and followed, along with a brace of associates. Caradoc's minions, prudently patient, had waited for the trio to finish loading boxes of stolen cigarettes into a van waiting behind the bingo hall before springing the ambush.

"So that's that," said Flinders, a ghost of query in the statement. For Caradoc sounded less than jubilant over the victory.

"Not a bit of it. Nicking Padre is avocado vinaigrette, or, as it might be, a spot of vichyssoise." Caradoc, rocking from heel to toe and jingling change in his trouser pocket, smacked his lips in pantomime greed. "Starter course, I'm saying. You're the waiter, Nick, let's be having the main course, I'm peckish."

"Pardon, boss?"

"Cheryl Botton, if that was her name. Cheryl-Doris who was never reported missing. I say she is dead." He paused a beat before turning impatient, "Come *on* — a stand-up Rosetta Street girl like Nesta Eldred, grassing out of compassion? Worried about a snippety little tart who isn't even family? Credit that and I can tempt you with a long lease on Buckingham Palace, fifty quid and it's yours."

The inspector abandoned mockery. "Something is scaring the spit out of Nesta, enough to make her break all the taboos and cozy up to the Filth. Great body still, but soft she is not, especially in the head. Heart isn't much better, I expect. Must be something very heavy to get her in bed with us.

"Bring her in, it's time for a meeting of minds."

"You've got no right." Nesta looked at the fresh pack of cigarettes and plastic cup of coffee arrayed on the interrogation-room table, patently yearning to sweep the lot onto the floor. "I'm supposed to be home, Jim will be back from the pub any minute."

"Since when did you worry about him? Sit down, it's a nice comfy chair. And stop talking foolish, we have a lot to get through tonight." Inspector Caradoc, a woman constable at his side, indicated the tape recorder. "This is off at the moment, you'll be told when we get official. You are being asked to assist with an

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enquiry. Drink your coffee 'fore it gets cold."

"That Nick Flinders could of fooled me," Nesta grumbled. "Not much *asking* from him, I was practically dragged here." After a minor battle of wills, she sipped from the cup. "Nothing I can tell you that I haven't already, this is a waste of time."

"Don't sell yourself short, luv. Don't sell *me* short, neither. Padre's been lifted, he's looking at three or four years, easy. Takes the pressure off, as I promised. No such thing as a free lunch, Nesta—ever hear that saying? I've done my part, it's your turn."

She appealed to the constable. "Has he been at the funny cigarettes again?"

"You're not very bright," Caradoc opined. "That stuff about worrying over Heidi might wash with Sergeant Flinders, but I'm an old bird and cannot be fed on chaff. Sorry, you're a city girl. Try this: Cut the crap, I'm not buying. You don't give a toss about Heidi, you are in fear of your own life.

"Nesta, Nesta, you're not the only one can drop a word in the right ear. My sources tell me yes, Heidi is a stunning girl, but she is engaged to a young tearaway called Don. Last name Fortune, old Benny F's nephew.

"Even if Padre Prior does fancy Heidi—you're the only one saying so, by the way — he'd never risk bother with the Fortunes. That's a very serious firm: Eat Padre alive, hard man or no, burp, and forget about it. And Padre isn't the suicidal type."

Nesta put the cup down, slopping its contents. "I know what I know. June has the needle over Padre and Heidi, you tell her there's nothing in it. That's all I ever wanted."

Caradoc shook his head. "Won't wash. June Prior is jealous and possessive, that's no fairytale. And she does suspect her husband of having an affair. With good reason. Every so often he slips away to a motel just outside Southend and disgraceful behaviour takes place. Why else would he and his fancy woman meet up regular, door locked, curtains pulled over?

"Prior's not the best guy to commit adultery with," he went on, smiling faintly. "Too much official interest. Essex police have noted his car at that motel regularly, so the fact was circulated. More useless information for the paper mountain. Only I dug it out, sent somebody to the motel with photos of Heidi . . . and you. They didn't pick *her* out as Mrs. Smith, regular temporary guest."

A tiny sound escaped Nesta before she whispered, "That ever gets out, June will kill me."

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"Talking of which . . ." Caradoc paused invitingly.

When she stayed silent: "Here's the way I see it, luv. Like you said, Padre Prior owns the place where you work, so he was there a lot. And something started up between you. Corny situation, corny because it happens so often. Husband and his wife's friend have known each other for years, and suddenly—boom.

"We all get bored, develop an itch to live dangerously. With luck, we only think about it. Servicing June's hubby right under her nose, that'd fit the bill if you wanted excitement."

"It's not like that!" Nesta shouted. "I begged him to leave me alone. I'm too old for that lark, got more respect for meself, and some common sense. But all of a sudden Padre was looking at me like I'm Julia bloody Roberts.

"I know what June can be like, have to be insane to get on her wrong side. Made no difference. Some blokes are turned on if you keep saying no. In the end Padre reckoned the only thing stopping me was fear of Jim—as if! Reckoned to put him in hospital, maybe cripple him for good, then I'd have no excuse for not playing along. Jim's not much, but he is all I've got, God help me. None of it was his fault, why should he get hurt? Damned if I did and damned if I didn't, what the hell was I to do?"

Caradoc believed her, with reservations. Behind the understanding expression of a sympathetic listener he speculated on subconscious drives behind the affair: Mousy June had turned the tables on her glamourous friend of the teenage era by marrying a hard-charger. Dangerous liaison or no, Nesta might have been tempted to get back at her. . . .

She sniffed and gulped. "So it started up with Padre. All right, he brought champagne and that, made a fuss of me. I had to fake it every time though, know what I mean? Terrified of *her*, June. Sure enough, she started up about Padre having a new bit on the side, did I know who it was? Always brings her troubles to me. . . .

"And I couldn't be sure if she was genuine, or knew about us and was winding me up. Still don't know. Could be playing cat and mouse, dragging it out. Wouldn't put it past her."

Nesta's face was towards Caradoc but she wasn't seeing him. "I'm not right in the head anymore—we'll be going over invoices or something, June's got her hand on my shoulder, and there's this, like, bubble . . ." she touched between her breasts ". . . ready to burst and I'll tell her it's me, do your worst. It's got to where I can't sleep or keep food down, had to do *something.*"

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The woman PC gave her a sheaf of tissues. Once Nesta regained control, a speaking glance from Caradoc sent the constable out of the room.

He admitted, "I've never taken much notice of June — seen her around, and she got lippy once when I lifted Padre at their house. But her heart didn't seem to be in it. Called me a lying mucker who'd fitted her hubby up, but that was just being a good wife, showing solidarity. I had her down as meek and mild."

Nesta laughed unsteadily. "Yeah, she is . . . most of the time. Meek? You should have seen her the time a mate of ours was chasing June's feller. She did no more than grab a—"

"Hammer, yes, I've heard. Ancient history, plenty of kids are wild, settle down later."

"If she is a saint, why drag me in here?"

"You got me interested in June, who scares you so much you tried to con us into saving your skin. Way you saw it, if we warned her off Heidi Drage, she would think twice about going after anyone she suspected. Daft scheme, because we need something to go on."

Caradoc waited until Nesta looked up. "But you have evidence. Something about the Botton girl, called herself Cheryl but you believe her name was Doris."

In certain contexts the stalest cliches emerge as not only accurate but apposite, as if coined for the occasion: Nesta Eldred looked as if she had seen a ghost. When her lips came back under control she stammered, "I know nothing about that."

"Sergeant Flinders made it up, you saying June got the hump and made The Other Woman vanish? Fair enough, his word against yours, it'd never stand up in court."

The hope in her eyes vanished again as he added, "Then again, we don't have to say anything. Police stations are gossip factories. I try to protect informants but it is uphill work. I've got this premonition it will leak out — who grassed on Padre Prior. He is out of the game now but I'm afraid June will hear. Tick-tick-tick, she'll start working things out. Damned either way, you said just now. Think about it. Either she will be after you for grassing, or guess why you had to get him out of the way, no matter what."

"You . . . you wouldn't tell her."

"Not directly," Caradoc conceded with a cardsharper's smirk. It wiped away. "Try me, I'm a bastard, remember. Do anything to get my own way. See, I remember something you said about

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Cheryl or Doris. You were trying to talk me into cooling June Prior down. If I didn't, you said, another girl might 'end up in—' Then you got cold feet, made it 'end up in a ditch.' Indicating you know exactly where Cheryl ended up."

He passed Nesta a cigarette and lighted it for her. "You and June were mates for ever so long. Until Padre didn't want himself tied in with a toerag like your Jim. But lo and behold, time passes and she gets you a job in her office, meaning you're working for her husband. I expect she asked him pretty-please, and Jim's no danger to anyone anymore, so Padre told her to go ahead. The interesting bit is why she bothered.

"We can both think of a reason, eh? She needed to keep an eye on you, keep you honest. Correction, dishonest, your trap shut. Ironic — guilty conscience made her install you at McGrath's, Padre Prior kept seeing you there, next thing it was all down to true love. As luck goes, yours is world-record rotten."

Nesta Eldred nodded, lips curving down in the exaggerated grief of a classical tragedy mask. "Gloat away, you nasty little sod. Where does it start, tell me that? I never asked to be at school with June. Couldn't help being born round the corner from her. Did I make her marry Padre? And him, he could of had me any day of the week before she got her hooks in. He didn't want to know, we was like brother and sister. That's why June never minded him kidding around with me — she knew it meant nothing, thought she knew.

"And then, *then,* when he's lost his looks and grown the beer belly and I'm played out, sick of sex, nothing will do for Mr. Wonderful but me on my back for him." She scowled at her hands. "I'd throw up in the shower after, scared silly of what June would do if she caught on. Pig-sick anyway, not just the cheating, but Padre making me a prozzie, doing him free. He was a lovely bloke once, too. It was a bloody farce, dirty joke. On me, on her."

"Yes," Caradoc said inadequately. He jerked his chin, and the female officer watching through the door's square of reinforced glass returned to the interrogation room.

"Nesta, the recorder's going on." Inspector Caradoc gave his name and rank, the constable's name and rank, announced the location, date, and time.

Wiping her eyes, Nesta Eldred mumbled, "There's nothing I can tell you. Not for certain, and that's the truth, on my mother's eyes. But I know June . . .

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"You're right, Padre wanted her to give me the elbow after I married Jim." She frowned at a thought. "Here! I reckon that's why she never twigged what was going on, him taking against me like that. She never took no notice; do her justice, she is loyal. She was supposed to drop me, but we'd still go pubbing and that, she came round our house a lot. Jim never there while a pub was still open, I was glad of the company. Sometimes she gave me the creeps, but she'd be right as rain most of the time, a good laugh, plenty of money from the old man and always generous. . . . Good friend, you could say."

Nesta Eldred blew her nose and reached for another cigarette. "I can't make it out, her and me. Maybe she wants somebody she can be with and drop that Meek-Little-Me act. If she wasn't a lunatic on the quiet, I would like her, and sometimes I do anyway. But it's too much now, she scares me sick.

"After me and Padre had been at it awhile, she caught on. Not who he was seeing, but she could tell there had to be somebody. Raved on and on about finding who it was, and what she'd do to them."

Nesta gave Caradoc the strangest look, anger and shame and pride combined. "When I started out, belle of the muckin' ball, tell me I'd end up screwing my best friend's husband, a pig who never brushes his teeth, and her a nutter . . . I wouldn't have believed it. Just as well we can't see the future.

"Put yourself in my place, listening to her carrying on like a madwoman, sweating bullets all the while and giving it plenty of 'There there, darling, don't take on.' Nightmare! I told her one bit of truth, fellers are no better than dogs in the street, most of 'em. Doesn't mean nothing, only to us. Doesn't matter to *them*. They always come home after they've had a good old roll in something smelly.

"June nearly went for me the time I said that. Jesus, the look on her face . . .

"It wasn't about Padre, she reckoned, it was about some slag taking liberties, making a fool of her." Nesta hugged herself, gazing around the room in wonderment. "What am I going on about? Maybe that barmaid did just sling her hook, get off out of it."

Caradoc announced the time by his watch. "I am suspending this interview—Mrs. Eldred needs a break." The recorder clicked off.

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With what might have been genuine regret, he continued, "You're on your own if you keep this up. Best thing you can do is move right out of London. When June finds out you grassed, she is bound to come after you. Inevitable, is that—no getting out of it," he translated, ever helpful. "You'll have to sell Jim on doing a quick flit. Beats me what your excuse will be. Unless you leave him behind, make a clean break while you still can, that's the ticket."

Medusa confronted him. "Heartless, heartless bastard. You'll get me killed."

"Nothing to do with me, luv. All down to you." He waited, finger poised above the On key of the tape machine. Nesta Eldred cursed him fluently and without repetitions. The woman constable and Caradoc listened unmoved until Nesta ran out of ideas.

"You never finished your coffee," he pointed out. "Pamela, nip down the canteen—Nesta takes sugar. See if they've got those little pots of cream, not the powder, that's diabolical. I'm going to wash my hands, as they say." He and the constable went out, a male officer stepped in from the corridor to keep their visitor company.

Towards dawn, hoarsely, Nesta told the tape recorder: "I don't know nothing for certain. Only . . . Jim landed this job, night watchman. Where the gasworks used to be, Bruton Marshes? Me and June had a laugh about that, how he would be kipping when he should be watching, lucky the gasworks was knackered or they'd steal it from under the lazy bugger. Longest job he ever had, best part of two years before they knocked the place down. Then they didn't need him, just left signs up. 'Attack Dogs on Site,' load of nonsense, there wasn't no dogs.

"Jim never handed his keys in, couldn't be bothered. I nagged him about it, but he said if the bosses weren't worried, why should he be, nothing there to nick anymore, just rubble. 'Change the record, Nessie, get off my case.' Talking like a Yank, pity he's never earned like one.

"Well, you know how it is when women moan about their old men—I only went and told her about Jim being too idle to walk half a mile and turn them keys in. If I hadn't gone and opened my silly trap . . . But you've got to talk about something, right?

"What it was, June turns up one night. Couple of years back, no, longer. Nearer three, I been at McGrath's three years come Christmas and it wasn't long after that night she got me the job.

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She was in a state, bundle of nerves but dreamy as well. Big smile. If it wasn't June, I might have thought she'd been with a feller. Got on my nerves, she did—cat that swallowed the canary, but all on wires, too.

"It was late, Jim asleep in front of the telly, and she takes me out to the kitchen. Wanted Jim's keys. 'What keys, what d'you want them for?' I went. 'Never you mind,' she says, 'are you my friend or what? What's it to you, nothing worth nicking at Bruton Marshes.' I didn't like it. Let on Jim had thrown the keys away, but June goes, 'Don't give me that, I seen you put them in that vase on the telly.' Nothing much gets past her.

"So I had to give her them and she gave 'em back next day. I dropped them straight down a grating, stormwater thingy in the street, didn't want no part of it."

Nesta attempted a smile and a dismissive gesture, failing in both. "For all I know, there wasn't no 'it' to be part of. She never told me nothing and I didn't dare ask. In case she did tell me. That's it, the lot. Satisfied now?"

Scattered iron incisors, molars of brick and stone, dormant snakes of rusty cables. Ragweed, nettles, stunted bushes half poisoned by sour soil pinched between cracks of concrete.

"You're just in time. Well, nothing's go at this moment but the project is on, contracts all but signed." Mr. Taylor, in sheepskin coat over four-hundred-guinea suit, green rubber boots replacing handmade loafers, was genial. As well he might be. He was a junior partner in one of London's larger commercial-properties agencies and the transformation of the gasworks at Bruton Marshes was his project.

"Just in time," Inspector Dewhirst echoed. "Whoopee." Surveying acre upon acre of jumbled concrete slabs, heaps of bricks, and half-demolished ironwork, he was openly glum.

His half-dozen constables were in overalls, but Dewhirst, leader of Rosetta Street's uniformed side, feared for his second-best trousers and tunic.

"This time next year we'll be looking at the Bruton Mar—er, Bruton *Farm* Mall," Taylor enthused. He broke off as a tawny blur broke cover among weeds a hundred yards off, going to ground amid a thicket of steel reinforcing bars writhing from shattered walls.

"Fox, not a cat," Mr. Taylor explained. "This place has amounted

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to a nature reserve right in the heart of London, since the gasworks closed down — after the installation was dismantled, and then the demolition. Foxes, rabbits, stoats and weasels, rats, of course, butterflies, birds. Wild geese when the lower section floods in winter. Shame it must end, but that's progress."

Inspector Dewhirst and Inspector Caradoc simply looked at him. Taylor grinned sheepishly. "Born lecturer, ought to be on TV. I'll leave you to it, then. Don't damage the site!" He clumped off, laughing at his own wit.

"Nature reserve. Foxes. A Yuppie stand-up comic, my cup runneth over. Tell me this is a wind-up, Dai," florid Dewhirst groaned. "Find anything in this lot? It'd be a job and a half for the entire division, let alone six duffers plus you and me. We need a bulldozer and one of those mobile cranes to get anywhere; couple of hundred Irish navvies would be appreciated."

"They'd only get under our feet. We're talking about a woman who's vicious but not muscular. Look at the gate she had to use—not wide enough to let a car through, even if she was ready to risk her tires on this lot. Which she wouldn't have been, could not afford to get stranded on private property. She worked alone and at night, couldn't have seen her way clearly. If it is here, what we are looking for will be near that gate, no farther than she could drag it, and I doubt if it's deep down."

Inspector Dewhirst stamped, not in a tantrum but to test the ground. "Mostly concrete," he agreed. "Chance it may not be buried, as such."

"I'd start with gaps in the foundations," Caradoc advised. "And under debris a slightly built female could shift without help. No point in shifting heavy items just yet." He grinned maliciously. "Save that for the rest of the week."

A resigned Dewhirst briefed his party, finishing, "Watch where you're stepping, a lot of this place was underground, storage tanks and sumps and suchlike. Heads up, stay sharp, let's not have any broken legs."

Caradoc stayed where he was, staring idly. He noticed a flying jewel, wondering when he'd last seen a dragonfly. For all the dismal terrain, there was much life here. He reflected, sardonically, that he ought to have brought a beach chair and binoculars.

Inspector Dewhirst came back after half an hour to tease, "Rank has its privileges. Keep looking after your suede shoes, don't go playing with those nasty rough boys."

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"I'm thinking deep thoughts," Caradoc claimed, "CID stuff, deep as there is."

Dewhirst produced a cheroot and puffed with relish. "Worse ways of passing a day, at least it's not raining. There was a gasworks where we lived when I was a nipper. Dad told me it was a witch's castle, that was why it made such a terrible pong. The tales he spun, it's a wonder I—" His memoirs were halted by a shrill outcry from one of the searchers.

Dewhirst dropped the cheroot and hurried after Caradoc, who'd stopped pampering his footwear.

The constable had lifted a muddy sheet of plywood serving as lid for a shallow culvert, or possibly the space between hardstandings where huts had stood. The policeman imagined he was supporting the sheet at an angle to disclose what lay beneath. In fact it was keeping him on his feet while he swayed overhead, face averted.

Inspector Dewhirst spoke cheerily. "Well spotted, go and have a smoke or something." Under his breath, without mockery, he mourned, "They get younger every intake."

He and Caradoc squatted beside the slot. Dewhirst, grinning forcedly, mumbled, "Unforgettable perfume, eh?" Caradoc thought the carrion odor so faint that it might be imaginary.

They were looking down on a skeleton of sorts, a corpse reduced to bones fattened here and there by remains of tissue and rags of dank, discoloured clothing. There was no face, merely an absence of much skin or flesh, but long blond hair appeared intact though grimed and matted. With all teeth visible, the non-face was smiling fiercely.

Dewhirst's eyes had widened and his voice was muffled by fingers across his mouth. "What the hell are we dealing with here .... she's been torn apart. There's most of an arm missing, Dai."

"Foxes, remember," Caradoc soothed. "I bet she was intact when June Prior put her down there. Just killed, your generic unlawful taking of life, the rest is animal damage."

"Oh . . . that's all right then." Heaving upright, bloodless cheeks rendering his ginger moustache unconvincing, something for amateur dramatics, Inspector Dewhirst heard his own comment and was sheepish about it. "You know what I mean, Dai."

Caradoc knew; the other man was a Falklands war veteran, far from squeamish, but he had been involved in a series killings case, torture and mutilation beyond description. One such odyssey was enough. . . .

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"Call me a pessimist, Bert, but my guess is this lady is dead. Better call the doctor anyway, do it by the book."

Dewhirst accepted the black humour gratefully. "She doesn't look at all well," he acknowledged. "I'll use the radio in my car." Delighted to turn his back on the scene.

"Try not to tramp around any more than you have done, lads," Inspector Caradoc warned the search party. "Go back by the tracks you made on the way in, wait by the gate, keep those civilians out."

Gawpers had materialised on the far side of the chain-link fence, lining an alley he could have sworn to be deserted five minutes before. A familiar phenomenon—metropolitan vultures gathered as if by instinct.

To those distant onlookers he seemed to be at prayer. Down on one knee, examining what was left of — never speculate, never assume, but it had to be — a pretty barmaid with the wrong lover in her past, and no future.

This was not the end of the matter, simply commencement of its next stage. June Prior might break quickly. If she did not, then he had taken the first step on a new mile of weary road.

Another dragonfly hovered nearby. He could tell it wasn't the original, for that had been electric blue while this one (suspended for an instant before departing with the swiftness of a conjuring trick) was russet and ruby. If he dug a pond in the back garden, that clay patch where roses never did well, it might encourage — *forget the dragonflies.*

Leaning right into the gully, Inspector Caradoc noted a metal worm wriggling among the tumbled, small bones of one foot. Her ankle chain wasn't gold, whatever she had believed, and its meager yellow coating was piebald with corrosion.

Human beings, judging by the specimen meeting his eye in the shaving mirror every day, were odd. Why the hell did he find the spoiling of a worthless trinket so moving?

Caradoc shelved the riddle and opened his notebook. Two wrongs did not make a right, so he was not proud of what he had done to Nesta Eldred in the cause of getting this far on the journey.

But he felt considerably better about it. ●

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BY ANNE PERRY

Out There In the Darkness
BY ED GORMAN

King George's Gold
BY EDWARD D. HOCH

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BY RUTH RENDELL

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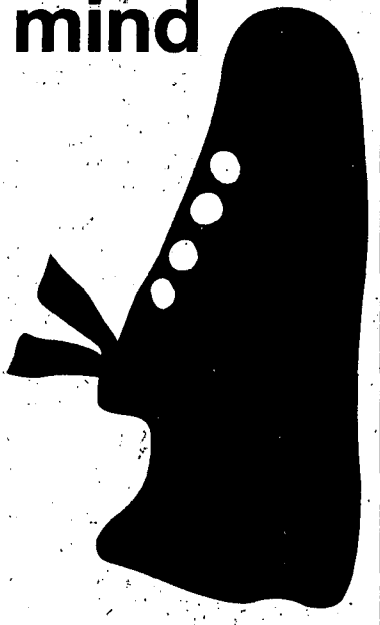

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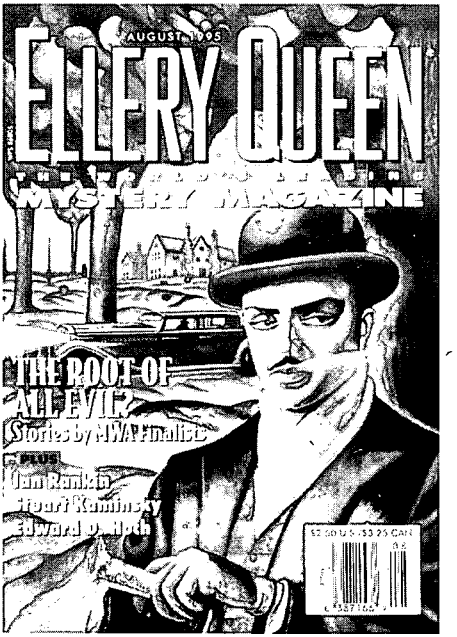

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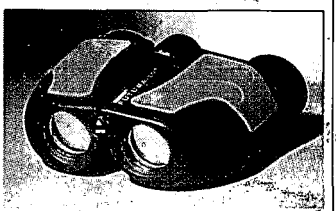

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